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December 9, 1890.

No. 698.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXVII.



OR, Light-Heart Lute's Clean Sweep.

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AUTHOR OF "CHINCAPIN DAN," "DAINTY
LANCE," "MUSTANG SAM," "HURRICANE
BILL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN WITHOUT A HEAD.

RISING above the confused chorus of angry cries, fierce oaths and menacing growls, came the harsh voice of "Rusty Jack" Cripps:
"What's the use o' chinnin' funder? Hyar's the kind o' argymint even a crazy critter kin understand!"

With a deft flirt, he dropped a noose over that white-crowned head, slipping one hand

SHIELDING OLD CRAZY WITH HER OWN FAIR BODY, CHIQUITA SENT ARROW AFTER ARROW INTO THE GLOOM.

along the rope until the rough knot was hidden by the flowing beard of the old man standing so helpless in the midst of the rough gang.

"Don't—it chokes—"

"That's its name an' natur," laughed Rusty Jack, coarsely, giving the rope an impatient jerk. "Truth-choker, fer short! Last call an' last warnin', Old Crazy! Sing yer song, an' sing it true, or—off comes the hull head o' ye!"

His hairy paws gave the rope another jerk, so forcible that the old man flung out his arms to preserve his balance. The shock must have given no little pain, yet the sound extorted from those lips was a laugh.

"Steady, Cripps!" came a clear, warning voice. "Draw it a little milder, pardner."

Old Crazy turned toward the last speaker, flinging out one bony hand by way of emphasizing his words:

"He calls me crazy, yet—poor blind fool!" turning swiftly to the burly ruffian who had brought the rope into requisition as a last resort. "Have ye no eyes? Are ye blind, as well as crazy? Where is my head?"

"Whar it won't be much longer, critter, ef ye don't talk powerful smart! Whar'd ye hit yer pay-dirt? Whar's the bonanza ye've bin workin' the past two year? Dug-gun ye fer a grizzly hog! Ye've had the swill-trough to yer lonesome self plenty long 'nough, an' ef ye don't show up in a holy hurry, we'll run ye so mighty high the buzzards 'll build nests in the ha'r o' yer head long afore—"

"My head?" echoed Old Crazy, with a repetition of that strange, hollow laugh. "Where is my head? I have none! I lost it ages ago! I have searched, and prayed as I searched, but still I cannot find it. If you can tell me where to look for it, I'll—"

"What ye call this?" cried Cripps, grasping his victim by the hair and giving his head a rough shake. "Head or no head, it makes a bump plenty big fer to keep the rope from pullin' off with the heft o' ye. An' of ye don't open the head o' ye right smart, up a tree ye go!"

Old Crazy struck the rude hand from his head, turning toward the young man who had feebly protested on his behalf shortly before, a touch of pity mingling with the contempt in his voice:

"The poor fool is blind, or he would not talk of— Have you seen my head, stranger?" with an abrupt change in face and voice, his bony fingers trembling as he gently touched Showy Joe Hoover on an arm. "If you might only help me find it! It is so hard—so strange—so piteous! Just think! A man without a head! And I have none! I lost it—where did I lose it?"

Rusty Jack ground forth an ugly imprecation and reached out a hand to close upon the strange being, but the hairy paw was swiftly thrust aside by Hoover, whose blue eyes glittered vividly as he muttered, in a hasty aside:

"Draw it mild, I tell ye, man! Leave him to me, can't you?"

With the rings on his slender white fingers flashing in the red rays of the declining sun, Joe Hoover loosened the noose and cast the rope over its owner's shoulders, making an imperious sign with the same hand while it was behind Old Crazy's back.

Plainer than words that signal spoke, yet the excited gang was loth to hold their hands, already itching to close upon the death-rope.

An ugly muttering ran from lip to lip, lurid glances were interchanged. One word would have sent them at the throats of both men. But that word was not spoken by Cripps, and lacking a bolder leader, the crowd instantly fell back a few feet, leaving Old Crazy and the flashily-arrayed gambler in the center.

"You are right, old chap," softly smiled Hoover, gently smoothing those disordered locks of almost snow-white hair. "He is crazy. They are all crazy save you and I."

"He spoke of my head, but—I have no head!"

"Not with you, that's clear enough for even a blind man to see!" laughed the gambler, soothingly. "You forgot to screw it in place when you set out for town, of course. And that's why I did not recognize you and interfere with these crazy knaves before. You know, I never saw you without your head until this evening, and that accounts—"

Old Crazy was gazing into his smiling countenance so intently that, despite his boasted nerve and coolness, Joe Hoover felt himself flushing hotly, his glib tongue growing strangely clumsy, until he actually broke down.

There was enough in his appearance to excite curiosity, even in that wild and fantastic region, and this is what Old Crazy saw:

A man of about thirty years, tall and graceful in build, lithe as a panther in motion, yet with a

muscular development that had taken more than one reckless "chief" by surprise.

A perfect blonde, Hoover wore his hair rather longer than would have been deemed correct in the city of his birth. The silken threads of pale gold were pushed back of his ears, their curling ends touching the coat-collar behind. His eyes were blue as the skies of summer, large and liquid, generally filled with a sweet, innocent, childlike smile, though they could flash fire and fury on occasion. His complexion was marvelously fair, and his skin, smooth and velvety as that of an infant, apparently bade defiance to the tanning sun and chafing winds from the mountains.

His face was a little too long and narrow for strict beauty, and the silken mustache drooping over his lips could not entirely hide the weakness of his mouth; yet Joseph Hoover was called handsome, even by those who liked him least.

With such a face and figure, and being a gambler by "profession" into the bargain, it is hardly strange that Hoover should have paid more rather than less attention to dress; and though this was what might be called "an off day" with him, there was a startling amount of glare and glitter about his person, when summed up.

In cut and fit his garments were irreproachable, plainly the handiwork of an artist, and the material as fine as money could procure; but there the eternal fitness of things came to an end.

His coat was of a rich bottle-green. His low-cut waistcoat was light salmon. His trowsers more of a lilac than pearl. His long, slender feet were incased in patent leather. From his bosom fell a filmy cascade of finest muslin, daintily embroidered with white silk, in vines and sprays and wreaths of flowers.

Across his bosom coiled a massive gold chain, twice doubled. In his shirt gleamed two diamond studs, and securing the red scarf gleamed and sparkled a big brooch of diamonds. On nearly every finger of his white hands were rings, from plain gold to flashiest jewels, and then—strangest sight of all, considering his sex—he wore earrings!

Golden hoops, the lower half of which formed a daintily chased crescent, in the bend of which hung a golden star, set with a diamond.

It was this extravagant love of dress and jewelry to which Joseph Hoover owed his sobriquet of "Showy Joe," just as a hardly less marked personal peculiarity led the diggers to dub Cripps "Rusty Jack."

These two men were close chums, despite the strong contrast between them, and in this instance Showy Joe seemed to lose his catlike distaste for dirt and slovenliness.

The one word "rusty" described Cripps to perfection. His skin, hair, eyes, clothes, all and everything going to form the ruffian, was of dull, rusty brown.

On the other hand, the old and seemingly decrepit being whom Jack Hoover called Old Crazy, afforded a study hardly less curious, though after still another fashion.

In more youthful days he had been tall, above the average of his sex, though his figure was bowed at the shoulders as with the weight of many years. His hair, still profuse of growth, fell to his shoulders, joining with his luxuriant beard, the snowy hairs of which reached half way to his waist.

His eyes, though sunken deep into their sockets, were still bright and keen, showing almost black in the shadows of his shaggy brows. In strange contrast to the rest, these were black as jet, without a silver line in either.

His garb was more Indian than civilized, composed mainly of smoke-tanned skins, part of them with hair or fur remaining; but the cartridge belt about his middle, and the firearms he bore, were plainly modern, the best that gold could procure.

Showy Joe Hoover quickly rallied, throwing off that unpleasant premonition, smiling blandly into the face of the old man, as he softly muttered:

"Whisper in my ear where you left it, pardner, and we'll go fetch it, together. Then we'll show 'em a head as is a head! Eh?"

"I've lost mine—"

"But we'll find it, won't we? Come, daddy. Just give me a hint as to the way, and we'll give these dough-boys a holy surprise! They'll never talk of putting a rope over your head, when once they see what a fine head it is! Why, daddy, they'll want to set you up on a golden throne to play king over 'em all! They just will, now!"

Laughing softly at the fancy, Showy Joe

slipped an arm through that of the old man, seeking to draw him away, out of the crowd, but his rising hopes of complete success were quickly dashed to the earth.

"No! you're crazy as he—crazier, even!" harshly cried Old Crazy, freeing his arm by a quick jerk, his dark eyes glittering vividly as he uplifted a warning hand. "Back! touch me not! There is a black curse on all who even think of keeping my company! Death will surely claim one and all who try to follow my footsteps, or— Back, I warn ye, boy! There's death and misery in the very shadow I cast!"

"But I'm your best friend, daddy," persisted Showy Joe.

"Friend? I have no friends! I lost them when—when I lost my head! For—I did lose it, gentlemen," his voice growing husky as he cast a swift, yet appealing, glance around him. "If you might only put me in the way of finding it again, I'd—I'd be so thankful! For it's awful—it's worse than death a thousand fold—this living without a head! If you only knew—"

"Durn the head!" growled Rusty Jack, once more attempting to take command, shaking the noosed rope menacingly before that haggard face. "What we want to find is the bonanza out o' which you rake them mighty rich hunks o' yaller pay. Eh, lads?"

"An' wantin' means havin' 'ith us, too!"

"Too much talkin's more'n a-plenty! Time fer actin', now!"

"Make the fool' critter tell, or send him up a tree!"

Their patience worn out at last, the rough customers closed in about that dazed unfortunate, a dozen hands gripping his limbs, a score of voices howling for the rope as the surest method of extorting the precious secret they had coveted for so long a time.

CHAPTER II.

THE LAD OF LUCK.

"MAKE haste slowly, gentlemen!" cried a clear, ringing voice from the outside of that surging mass. "Pick up your manners, before they get trampled all out of shape!"

Two of the nearest diggers felt a close grip on their collars, then went spinning backward, to trip and fall with far more force than grace or comfort.

"Cut a swath your own bigness, Poley!" added that voice, with the echo of a laugh in each word. "There's meat in the middle, once the shell is fairly cracked. And—sorry, but—please make room for your uncle, Johnny!"

Right and left another brace of amazed fellows reeled, though either of them was larger and heavier by far than the owner of those muscular hands.

This made an opening, into which the speaker and his companion plunged, splitting the surprised crowd much as a whirlwind forces a passage through a clump of timber, only pausing when their goal was fairly won.

Not a blow was struck, nor a weapon displayed. It was a simple grip, a swift twist and a shove. It was pure skill in the case of the speaker, but simple strength on the part of his chum, a giant in size and muscular development.

All was accomplished so swiftly that there was no actual resistance on the part of the men they handled so unceremoniously, and before the truth could be fairly realized, Old Crazy stood free of angry hands, the men yet on their feet instinctively shrinking back from those rescuing beings.

Showy Joe Hoover dropped his white hand from shoulder to belt, his red lips curling away from his white teeth, his blue eyes glittering serpent-like, even as he visibly shrunk from that frank, laughing face as its owner quickly uttered:

"Don't waste your cartridges, Joseph, I beg of you, dear man!"

"What right have you to interfere, when—"

"When I saw forty men climbing all over one poor devil?" a little sharply interrupted the new-comer, though that bright smile was still upon his comely face. "Well, just for luck! Wasn't it, Poley?"

"Ef you say so, boss," rumbled the giant, stolidly glancing over the scowling faces closing in about them.

"Luck goes, then, Joseph!"

"I'll splatter luck all over the grinnin' mug o' ye, Light-heart Lute!" hoarsely growled Rusty Jack Cripps, coming with a vicious rush.

Only so far.

Napoleon Applejohn took one mighty stride forward, his huge hands grasping the furious ruffian by thigh and shoulder, heaving him

clear of the ground, then hurling him away with a force that knocked over half a dozen of his astonished fellows like tenpins.

"Set down, critter!" he rumbled, stepping back to his place, his massive countenance placid as ever, only a brightening glow coming into his sleepy eyes to tell that his sluggish passions were rousing. "L'arn to speak when you're spoken to. Afore then is bad manners."

"Flag of truce, gentlemen!" cried Light-heart Lute, lifting an open hand as his keen eyes saw weapons being drawn. "We didn't come here to fight, but simply to ask—What in time has this poor old fellow done to deserve such clapper-clawing, anyway?"

"It's the Lad o' Luck, boys!" spluttered one of the roughs, apparently just recognizing the bold intruders. "Let him tackle the old cuss, an' ef he gits thar—waal, mebbe some o' hit luck'll scatt'r onto us—see?"

"I'll scatter his brains so dog-gun fur that—" "You can't prove I've got any, Rusty Jack," laughingly interposed Light-heart Lute. "Now simmer, or I'll turn my bad luck faucet, and give you such a bath as you've never known since you left your mother's hands and put on trousers!"

There were ugly looks, but for the most part these were turned toward Cripps, and he was not so mad but that he could recognize the truth in time. The tide had turned in favor of this bright-faced young fellow, as it almost invariably did, and though Rusty Jack thirsted for revenge, his lust for gold was still more intense.

"Make him talk up, then!" he growled, sulkily. "What right has the likes o' him keepin' sech a mighty find all to his own hoggish self? Make him tell whar he gits all his nuggets!"

"Soothe him down, an' butther him up, laddy-buck! Sure, it's only the length av our arrums we want to dip into the treasure-box he's got stowed away in the hills beyant!"

From lip to lip the cry ran around, always the same in substance, though different in shape. The gold-fever was burning in their veins, and only gold or blood could quench their mad thirst.

Light-heart Lute let his eyes pass from one to another as those varying appeals were made. The bright smile faded out of his face. His red lips compressed. A clear, almost stern glow stole into his frank blue eyes. To turn to a look of pitying sympathy as he looked once more into that haggard face so near his shoulder.

He seemed very youthful to have such an important case on his hand, and, to tell the simple truth, he hardly knew how to manage it for the best.

He could not have seen more than twenty years, at the outside, and thanks to his boyish face, smooth and fair as that of a girl, he appeared even younger than he really was. And yet—when closely scanned, one could not help recognizing in him a man.

In height he was barely up to the average, and in his loose sack coat, without vest over his flannel shirt, he seemed rather light of frame. Yet he weighted clean ten stone, every ounce of which was sound, healthy matter, full of nerve and sinew as an eggshell is of meat.

He was a comparatively new-comer in that region, but during those few short weeks, Luther Larrimer had made his mark, as well as won a valuable reputation as a favorite of fortune.

Despite his bright, gay, off-hand manner, there was something about Light-heart Lute, as his giant chum habitually called him, which kept the inquisitive at a distance, and they learned little more concerning his business than Napoleon Applejohn saw fit to communicate.

That was not much. They had no particular business in view. They were simply "prospectin'," always open for a lucky stroke of business in case any such opportunity should offer. Who was he? Light-heart Lute, the lad of luck. Good-by, sir!

"It's the same old song, then?" asked Light-heart Lute, his red lip curling with scorn. "For shame, men! Every one of you stout, able-bodied fellows, and he a poor, broken-down old man! Go find your own bonanzas, and let him go his way in peace."

"That's jest what we want him to do!" grimly cried out one of the men, with a coarse laugh. "But he won't do it. They ain't no more go in him than in a dug-gun, contrairy mule."

"Because he knows you intend dogging him home."

"Because I know that they would follow me to their deaths!" vehemently cried Old Crazy, gesticulating fiercely. "Because they are worse than the crazy fool they call me! Because there is grim death or living torture still more bitter, in the very shadow my figure casts on the earth!

It is for their own sakes I refuse to speak out what they seek to learn."

"We'll run the resk, mighty quick, old man!"

"Not with my consent."

"Give him a tetch o' the rope, an' mabbe it'll loosen his clapper, mates!" snarled one of the more impatient ruffians.

"Steady, pards!" nodded Light-heart Lute. "Don't let your clapper ring too loud a note. Don't you know: the very worst use you can put a man to is to hang him?"

"Oh, make a break, somebody! What's the use chawin' wind this-a-way? Hyar's the rope, yender's a tree, an'—thar's room a-plenty in the atmospheric fer all three to do tha'r kickin' 'thout interferin' with each other!"

"Hang me, ye fools!" cried Old Crazy, tossing back his tangled locks in a snowy cloud, bursting into a harsh, hollow laugh which betrayed far more of bitterness than of mirth. "Hang me—the man without a head! What will you hitch the rope to? Bah! ye crazy loons!"

"Got you, there, hasn't he?" laughed Light-heart Lute. "Without a knob to hold it on, what good's your noose?"

"Run him up by the heels, then! 'Tain't death we're a'ter, but talk! Talk an' a promise to guide us to his big find—no less!"

"To your death, rather!" frowned Old Crazy, plucking nervously at his beard with bony fingers. "My very shadow blights all it falls across! And would ye dare a living death just for a few paltry bits of worthless dross?"

"If it is so worthless, daddy, why not give us a show for a share?" sneered Hoover, who had fallen back, listening in place of acting.

"Possibly because he fancies that share would swallow up the whole," laughed Light-heart Lute. "Men of your profession bring mighty sticky fingers to the feed-trough, es a rule, Joseph."

"Never you mind my fingers, lad. It simmers down to just this: the secret must be shared with us, sooner or later. He's dodged us all on two different occasions when we let him go in peace, thinking to trace him to the end without kicking up a row. Now—we've got him in our clutches, and he's either got to sing or—croak!"

"An' thar's only one sure way fer to yank a tune out o' sech a bull-headed critter!" growled Rusty Jack, shaking aloft his noosed rope.

"He talks of my head—have you seen it lying around lo se anywhere, my son?" faltered Old Mystery, placing an unsteady hand on an arm of his generous defender, his eyes filled with a pleading, wistful light, his ears unheeding those ominous mutterings among the crowd.

"Will you trust me, if I try to find it for you, daddy?" softly asked Lute, a glow of honest sympathy in his own eyes.

"Talk up, thar!" suspiciously cried Rusty Jack, gathering courage as he found the tide turning his way once more. "He's tryin' to git at the secret fer him own self, boys! Shell we stan' that?"

"Fair play! No skulduggery!"

With a proud toss of his head, Light-heart Lute faced those ugly scowls, actually seeming to glory in the peril, though his empty hands were resting lightly across his middle.

"Daddy hinted that you were lacking brains, gentlemen, and I'm beginning to think he wasn't so mighty far astray in his guess. You've heard him give his reasons for not singing; it's bad medicine to step in his tracks."

"We'll run all that resk, never you skeer, Lucky Lad!"

"And there you paint my portrait, in two words," with a low, amused laugh, his eyes glowing with a curious mixture of mirth and contempt. "Now, wouldn't you be the crazy fools he calls you, to tackle both sorts of luck—bad luck and good luck?"

Rusty Jack Cripps dropped his rope, his burly form shrinking into itself, so to speak, as he stood behind one of his mates.

He saw that neither Lute nor Poley Applejohn were touching a weapon, though each was well supplied in that line. And slipping a revolver from its holster under cover, he suddenly pushed his mate to one side as he brought his cocked pistol to a level, the sights bearing full upon the swelling bosom of the Lad of Luck.

"Whar's your luck now, dug-gun ye, critter?" he snarled, viciously showing his yellow teeth. "Stiddy, all two both o' ye! I'll blow ye through at the fu'st move!"

"Steady, Poley!" coolly cried Light-heart Lute, throwing out one hand to the moving arm of his giant chum. "The fool dare not shoot!"

"I'll mash every bone in yer body ef ye harm—Ha!"

"Didn't I tell ye so, Rusty?" laughed the Lad of Luck, as Cripps pulled trigger, only to have the hammer stop at half-cock. "A miserable sinner like you can't hurt a Christian, and—I knew it!"

With a savage curse Rusty Jack dropped the faithless weapon to snatch at its mate in his belt. But as the pistol struck the ground, it exploded, and with a wild yell of bitter agony, its owner reeled back, a victim of his own deadly attempt at assassination!

CHAPTER III.

BETTER HALF A LOAF THAN NO BREAD.

THOSE who had been watching the chums rather than the ruffian, shrunk back at that explosion and yell, thinking, even while their eyes told them better, that from one or the other of the twain that avenging shot had come. And as they fell away, they drew their pistols, acting according to the blind instinct which governs in such cases.

"Steady, gents!" cried Light-hearted Lute in sharp, clear tones. "You chip in if you're aching to share his bad luck."

"The p'izen critter shot his own self, didn't he?" rumbled Poley Applejohn, in his deepest chest-notes.

"Crippled! oh, just look at that!" fairly screamed Rusty Jack, lifting his right hand where all could see it, blood sprinkling over its owner in a scarlet shower. "Cuss him! He put a hoodoo onto it!"

By some strange chance the lead from his own weapon had struck his hand, tearing through the knuckles, shattering the bones in a terrible manner.

Young Larrimer saw his chance, and made the most of it.

"I gave you fair warning, Rusty Jack Cripps, but you would buck against fate. Now—do you want to risk another shot at the Lad of Good Luck?"

"Crippled! My right hand! Gone—crippled fer life!" groaned the burly ruffian, completely subdued by the mishap which had befallen.

"Hasn't he got a friend in all your gang?" called forth Lute, his brows darkening as he saw how superstitiously the rest fell away from the luckless ruffian. "All right; I'll bind up his hurt myself. Even if he did catch it trying to shoot me, I can't stand by and watch the poor devil bleed to death."

"They'll jump on the back o' ye, boss!" warned Poley, catching his friend by the shoulder and checking his forward movement.

Light-hearted Lute did not resist, but yielded to that friendly caution, for several of the crowd closed in about the wildly raving man with well-meant advice and offers of assistance.

As he saw this, Lute cast a glance in search of the prime cause of all the trouble, more than half-expecting to find him among the missing; but not so.

Old Crazy stood crouchingly, his bony hands hiding his face, his white locks falling in a veil below his wrists. It was an attitude that strongly resembled fright, yet his frame seemed rigid, and he certainly did not tremble.

Light-heart Lute hardly knew what to do with his "white elephant," now he had taken possession of it. He had acted on the impulse of the moment, catching sight of a crowd abusing one man; but with his hand once to the plow, he was not one to abandon the furrow midway.

"I'm sorry for you, Rusty," he called out, intent on making the most of that strange chance. "I warned you frankly, but you wouldn't hear to the simple truth. Now—who's the next man to buck against the Lad of Luck?"

"Divil the wan o' me, so ye naadn't lunk this way, d'ye moind, now!" spluttered Patsy McKeon, ducking behind his own elevated elbow.

"None of us, unless you try to get away with the whole soup," another chimed in, with blunt honesty. "But we're bound to have a finger in the rich pie Old Crazy has kept to himself so long—just bound to, you understand?"

"Rusty Jack Cripps sung that same tune, and you saw what came of it," grimly laughed the Lad of Luck.

"That's through his fool's notion of convertin' a revolver into a dueling pistol, and only doing his work half-way; filing down the top-notch to a shadow, to make a hair-trigger of his gun! I always told him he'd have to either file out the other, or else change his touch to an honest pull; but he wouldn't have it that way! So—there you stand, and yonder he goes!"

"Heap sight luckier then he'd orter be that he kin go, 'thout bein' toted in a box!" rumbled Poley Applejohn, frowning portentously. "Ef I was boss—"

"The hand he dared lay upon what he called my head—poor, blind, crazed fool!" suddenly broke forth Old Crazy, flinging up his hands and following them with his wild eyes. "'Tis part of the curse placed upon me by—who? Could any spirit less cruel than Lucifer so terribly afflict a mortal? Could—Where am I? What does—Chiquita!"

His tones grew husky and choked. His form bowed, his hands dropped to his bosom, quivering and shaking as with a palsy. A frightened, hunted light came into his sunken eyes, and he looked such a pitiful object that Light-heart Lute placed a protecting, caressing hand upon his shivering back.

"She's coming, daddy," he hastily spoke, soothingly, much as one might address a frightened child. "I'll take care of you until then, so don't be afraid! Nobody's going to hurt you, here."

"Coax it out of him, then, Lucky," eagerly nodded the miner. "We'll let him have a fair show to stake out his claim, on the pick of the lead, but—he's got to share the pudding, you mind!"

There was no immediate response, for Larrimer was glancing from face to face as his keen ears caught those grim mutterings, all tending the same way. The peculiar accident which had happened to one of their number had only cowed those turbulent spirits for the moment. They might not return to such harsh measures as used by Rusty Jack, but none the less they were determined to learn the whole truth of the precious secret so long guarded by Old Crazy.

Lute's brain worked rapidly, and he was not long in summing up the case as it seemed to stand. Though he was a recent comer into that section, he knew his men as well as though he had spent a year among them.

If it had been nothing more than a simple "lucky find" at stake, he would have bluntly advised making the best of a bad bargain, and save further trouble by letting the covetous gang into the secret. But—was there nothing more precious at stake?

"Don't let 'em sneak off 'thout coming to a squar' onderstandin', mates!" cried out a suspicious rascal. "Cain't ye see he's workin' fer his own pocket, leavin' us to hold the bag?"

"Steady, Poley! And you, fellows," his tones growing hard and cold as ice as he flashed a glance over those scowling faces, "keep your distance. You ought to know who I am by this time. You know where to look for me when the right time comes, and—"

"Ef ye don't slip off under kiver o' night!"

"If I take to running, it'll be from a man, so that lets you out, Bill Hurst. As for the rest—I've only been *playing*, up to now; dare to crowd us, and I'll buckle down to *work*!"

Slipping a hand through one arm of his strangely won charge, gripping a cocked revolver with the other, his actions silently imitated by Napoleon Applejohn, Light-heart Lute moved away from the spot.

Growling in part, part coaxing, the covetous miners fell aside to give them free passage. Not a hand was lifted to stay their steps. It seemed as though one and all were in superstitious dread of the good luck which had once more befriended the young man.

Old Crazy made no resistance, silently permitting the chums to guide him whither they listed, his recent fire quenched, his still muscular frame shivering pitifully. He looked like one who had just passed through some terrible ordeal which had completely sapped his powers, mental as well as bodily.

Instead of striking out for the not distant town, Lighted-heart Lute turned toward the hills, pausing near the base of one, where a few scattered trees afforded some little shelter to those who needed it.

When they came to a halt, Old Crazy sunk to the ground, his head drooping, faint mutterings rising to his lips. With a strangely grave light in his eyes, Light-heart Lute bent close, trying in vain to catch his meaning.

His own pulse was beating with unwonted rapidity, and his usually clear brain was growing clouded. For—a strange, thrilling belief was gradually growing upon him! And yet—was it more than one of the many frail hopes which had appeared, only to fade as suddenly, since that blind quest had begun?

Drawing back a bit, he held out a hand toward his chum. Poley Applejohn as silently lugged forth a metal flask containing whisky, and Lute, gentle as a father coaxing a fretful child, soon induced Old Crazy to swallow a liberal draught of the fiery liquor.

This stimulant quickly did its work, and for the first time since that howling gang closed in

about him, the old prospector regained his normal condition, looking, acting and speaking like a sane man.

Though the sun had set, and dusk was coming on, Light-heart Lute took his own time, fearing to rush matters lest that shattered brain again give way and dash his new-born hopes to the ground.

Cautiously, in soothing, easy tones, he questioned Old Crazy, gradually drawing the whole truth from him, so far as his adventure with the mob under lead of Rusty Jack and Showy Joe was concerned.

There was not much to tell, and little which was new to the Lad of Luck. The lively mining-town had talked of little during the past two days but Old Crazy and the rich pack he had brought into town from his secret bonanza.

Just as he had on other occasions, the strange being entered town under cover of darkness. He was patiently waiting in front of the little office where held forth the moneyed man who was ever ready to buy dust or nuggets, prospect holes or developed claims, anything and everything in which he saw a chance to "make wages."

Word swiftly spread that "Old Crazy" had once more come to town with a mule-load of dust, and for at least the third time oaths were taken that his secret should become public property.

"And I can't see how you can keep them out of it, daddy," slowly said Light-heart Lute, staring into the little fire which Poley had kindled for both warmth and light. "They'll watch you closer than a hungry cat watching a fat mouse! They'll dog you until—well, if they don't find the bonanza, you'll find a grave!"

"That's what!" gravely nodded the giant, his face showing dimly through a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"And so—surely, daddy, half a loaf is better than no bread at all! You've made a tolerable strike already, if rumor don't lie. So, why not make the best of a bad bargain, and let the gang have what stray pickings they can rake up around your own solid claim?"

"Never!" sharply cried Old Crazy, his eyes gleaming vividly. "I will not! It would be robbing her—my little Chiquita!"

"Your daughter, do you mean?" slowly asked Light-heart Lute, a curious shade falling over his frank countenance. "How old is she?"

"It's hers—all hers, I tell you! They shall never—Are you one of the vile thieves, too?" sudden suspicion showing itself in face and voice. "Are you playing against me?"

"Look me squarely in the eyes, then say if you believe I'm playing you false," calmly spoke Larrimer, catching one of those bony hands, leaning forward until the ruddy glow fell athwart his own face. "Take your time, daddy; the whole night's before us. Look, and read. You're old enough to recognize a friend when you meet one, surely."

Old Crazy complied, for a few seconds. Then his keen gaze dimmed and his eyes drooped, his voice faint and uncertain as he spoke:

"Friend—I once believed in such a term, but that was long ago: ages ago, before I lost my head! Now—I can't think! I can only see my little—She's calling to me! Hist!"

Involuntarily Light-heart Lute glanced in the same direction, expecting—he hardly knew what.

But nothing came. All was still, save for a dull, distant murmur proceeding from the town beyond. And as he seemed to realize this, Old Crazy drew a deep breath, tossing back his tangled locks like one who seeks to banish an idle fancy.

Luther Larrimer, with something of that wild hope returning, caught at his chance, and made the most of it.

"I am your friend, if you'll let me be one, daddy; and as a true friend should, I'm pointing out the plain truth to your eyes and brain. As that friend, I say again, in still plainer words; you've got to give up part of your bonanza, or the whole of it!"

CHAPTER IV.

"MUSIC HATH CHARMS."

HE reached out a hand, but Old Crazy shrunk quickly back, jerking a pistol from his belt and menacing the Lad of Luck with the weapon.

"Back, I warn ye, boy!" he almost viciously grated, his eyes glittering keenly. "I'm old, but I'm tough! I'll fight for my—for *her* rights!"

Instead of dodging or attempting to shield himself, Light-heart Lute broke out into a low,

amused laugh, like one who saw nothing more dangerous in this action than a merry jest.

"Why, daddy, have you forgotten so soon? From the way you act, one'd think you took me for a knight of the road, with his stand and deliver!"

"Then you don't—you said—"

"That you'd show your wisdom by giving a share of your bonanza to those rough alleys, rather than have them cabbage the whole cake."

"I thought you meant—if I might only trust you!"

"Why can't you?" with earnest interest as he gently took that armed hand captive, quietly replacing the pistol in its holster. "I'm only a boy in years, but I've been a man for years; ever since I set out in quest of—but never mind that just now," hastily catching up his tongue, giving a nervous little laugh.

"Then you're looking for something, too?" muttered Old Crazy, in low, husky tones, leaning forward and gazing intently into those eyes. "It isn't—you haven't lost your head also?"

"I came pretty nigh it just then," with a short, forced laugh.

"May a merciful Heaven preserve you from such a horrible fate as that!" shivered the strange being, shrinking away, seemingly hurt by that sound of mirth. "If you could only begin to guess what it means to lack a head! If you—"

"If I had as noble a head as the one you carry above your shoulders this moment, daddy, I'd take mighty good care of it, be sure," was the quick response, cutting short that dangerous current of thought just in time. "And I'm doing my level best to preserve yours, too, daddy, though you don't seem to fully appreciate the fact."

He paused as though to collect his thoughts, broken in upon by that outburst of crazy suspicion, speaking slowly, the more surely to gain full comprehension from that shattered brain.

"Put in simple shape, the situation is just this, daddy: You've got a secret far too rich for any one man to keep forever to himself, so long as there's hundreds of poor devils who can't make their grub at mining hereabouts. It was all right so long as the secret was wholly your own, but now that the boys have dropped to your mighty good luck, they'll overturn mountains, but what they'll have a share in the find."

"If I've caught the story aright, you've given them the slip twice before this. Then you were twice as lucky as most men, and it would be too much to hope for lightning to strike in the same spot once more."

"Now here's the meat: Which can you better afford to do: give up a share, in order to save the rest, or lose the whole—and your life with it?"

"It's not mine. It's hers—all hers!" muttered Old Crazy, sullenly, his eyes downcast.

"By which you mean—your wife?"

"I have no wife."

"Your daughter, then?"

"Chiquita—it's all hers, I tell you, boy!"

"Then Chiquita will have to work the bonanza by her lonesome self, for you'll never return to her side while you hold out like this!"

"Never—but I *must*! She will be watching and longing for my coming! She counts the hours when—I *must* go—now!"

But that muscular hand checked his effort to arise, and Light-heart Lute hurriedly added, in grave, impressive tones:

"If you leave this camp-fire alone, in the dark, you'll never see the sun rise, daddy! Those rascals would kill you for the wealth you carry, if they failed to torture the richer secret from your lips!"

"I can give them the slip, just as I did before."

"That worked twice, they say, but it will never work again. Can't you understand it, daddy?" with wonderful patience for a stranger who could have no particular love for such a wretched being. "You can't take a single step without its being known. I dare say a full score of hungry eyes are upon us both this very instant, their owners only holding back in hopes of getting at your precious secret, through me."

"Yet you ask me to trust you?"

"Because there is nothing else for you to do, if you care to live long enough to see Chiquita once more," with a low, easy laugh that went far to cover his actual apprehension. "I can save you from those hungry wolves on two legs, but I'll have to do it after my own fashion, if at all. And I'm helpless without you can place at least a little confidence in my good intentions, daddy."

"What is it you wish?"

"Tell me where your find is located, or, better still, promise on honor that you will guide me and my chum to the spot where Chiquita is awaiting your return."

"She—why are you so anxious to see her? What do you know of my little girl?"

"Nothing more than you have let drop, and that's simply the fact of her existence," with another low, easy laugh. "I wouldn't know her from a side of sole-leather if we were suddenly put face to face. And, saving your presence, daddy, I care just as much about meeting her. I'm simply thinking of you, and your welfare."

"Why are you so anxious to serve me, then?" that old suspicion flamed up afresh in his sunken eyes.

"Because—I once had a father, wandering among the gold hills, who may have felt the need of a true-hearted friend, just as you ought to feel that need this hour, daddy," was the earnest response, that frank, honest voice trembling a bit, though it quickly steadied itself. "Because my father may have perished miserably for lack of a warning voice, or a helping hand, just as I now extend to you. Because—"

Shut out of this conversation, Napoleon Applejohn had finished his pipe, and seeing no signs of a break in that talk, he lay back at the base of the sheltering tree, and producing a mouth-organ from an inner pocket, began to play soft notes upon it.

It was this faint, almost ghost-like music that caused Light-heart Lute to abruptly cease speaking. Not because of an especial love for music in itself, though, he had spent many hours in practicing for an all important end; but at the first notes Old Crazy bent his half-turned head, fairly holding his breath as he drank in these notes.

"Louder, pard!" softly spoke Light-heart Lute, his own breath coming far more rapidly than ordinary, his eyes glowing strangely as he bent forward the more closely to watch that rapt expression stealing into the haggard face of Old Crazy.

Had fortune favored him at last? Was his long, weary, almost hopeless quest nearing its glorious end?

These questions flashed back and forth through his brain as he sat watching Old Crazy, hoping, longing, fearing, doubting, all in turn, as he noted those swift changing expressions.

Without questioning why this order was given, Poley played on, content in the harmony he was giving birth to, asking for no other reward.

"Now—strike up 'When you and I were young, Maggie!'" were the next words spoken by Larrimer.

At the first note of the old song, Old Crazy gave a start, lifting his head and casting a hurried glance around them, as though he more than half expected to catch sight of—what?

"Can it—surely it *must* be!" thought the Lad of Luck, with difficulty restraining his tumultuous emotions.

As Poley proceeded with his music, Old Crazy bowed his head, both hands clasping his temples as though the better to concentrate his powers of hearing. Or—was he trying to remember? Was he striving to recall the dim, phantom past, partly conjured up by those long-forgotten notes?

Wondering thus, Light-heart Lute joined his voice to the organ at the second verse, singing low and softly, as much like a woman as possible. But instead of the effect he hoped for, he scarcely knew why, his mellow tones seemed to break the spell which had fallen upon his strange guest of the night.

With a start and puzzled gaze around, Old Crazy lifted his arms and stretched, yawning heartily, then moved across to one of the trees on the other side of the fire, lying down and turning the cape of his buckskin hunting-shirt up over his bare head, like one wishing to go to sleep for the night.

"Hadn't we better go back to town, daddy?" asked Lute, choking back his bitter disappointment at this unexpected ending to his experiment. "Without blankets or bedding, I fear you'll take cold lying there."

"Go, if you like. No roofs for me," sleepily mumbled the old man.

"Where you sleep, there's good enough for me, daddy," cheerfully laughed Larrimer, dropping down beside the veteran. "But you didn't give me a fair answer, a bit ago: will you trust me to act for your good—and the good of Little Chiquita?"

"Let me—sleepy—so sleepy!" faintly muttered the miner, a shiver running over his frame, followed almost immediately by low, regular

breathing that told of slumber strangely profound.

"Waal, ef he *ain't* a case of a critter, then I wouldn't say so!"

Light-heart Lute gave a start at that low ejaculation, though it came in the familiar tones of his giant chum, who had put away his cherished mouth-organ and was now staring wide-eyed at that sleeping figure.

"I say, boss, you don't really reckon— He *hes* got a head onto his shoulders, hain't he, now?"

"A head, surely, pard, but," with a faint sigh that partly betrayed how full of trouble his own head was, "I fear the brain is— Never mind, old fellow!" giving himself a shake.

"We're in for a spooze with plenty of stars on our counterpane, I reckon!"

"'Twon't be the fu'st time, an' ef you ain't kickin', boss, I hain't no call that way. But—reckon them imps'll try any tricks on travelers, Lute?"

"Not as long as they see the old man in our company, be sure of that," with a short, meaning laugh. "They count on our getting at the secret for them, don't you see?"

"Fer I'd jest as soon keep all eyes open as not, ye mind, Lute."

"I know you would, old fellow, but I hardly think there's any need of standing guard. If there is, I'll rouse you out for your turn when I grow sleepy. Lie down and make the best of an empty bargain, eh, old free-feeder?"

"It's jest pullin' the belt a hole tighter," with a philosophical laugh, as he suited his action to the words. "Which is the wisdom o' stuffin' the hold chuck-full when ye hev the chance—see?"

Light-heart Lute made no answer, already lost in deep and troubled thought, and seeing as much, Napoleon Applejohn lay down on his face, his head resting on his crossed arms, readily dropping off asleep.

Not so with his chum. For more than an hour he sat on his crossed legs beside the fire, thinking, hard and deeply. It would take far too long to record his thoughts as they came into his busy brain, but the frequent glances which he cast toward Old Crazy told plainly enough that the strange miner had at least a share in those troubled musings.

After a long time, Light-heart, first bending close over Old Crazy, to make sure he was really sleeping, and not in a stupor, suggested by the suddenness with which that sleepy spell came upon him, lay down not far from the repletted fire, gazing dreamily up at the brightly twinkling stars high overhead.

Even then he had no expectation of falling asleep, and for perhaps an hour longer his excited brain kept up its busy work, if work such strange, confused imaginings could be called. Then—a strange spell of an altogether different sort seemed to fall upon him; a spell the nature of which he could no more comprehend than he could—*Ha!*

He brought one arm from under his head, dropping it by his side. And as he did so, a sharp *skir-r-r* sounded in his ears, and he caught sight of a snake's head rising between his arm and his body!

CHAPTER V.

A LIFE FOR A HAND.

WITH nerve and spirit broken as completely as his strong right hand had been shattered by that providential shot, Rusty Jack Cripps was led from the scene by the men who had been shamed into action by the words of the Lad of Luck.

Even to their coarse, hardened natures, it was pitiful to hear the once strong, domineering ruffian mourning his ruined member, at times sobbing like an aggrieved child as he held up his hand before his eyes.

"Crippled! No good any more! My best—why didn't it blow my darn fool' head off instead?"

"Think who you owe it all to, Jack!" came a low, hissing whisper in his ear, as a white hand stole through his arm.

The crippled ruffian gave a start, his sound hand dashing the mist from his bloodshot eyes. A harsh, peculiar note rose in his throat as he recognized the face of Showy Joe Hoover, and for a brief space something of his usual spirit returned to voice and manner.

"To you, dug-gun ye fer a sneak, Joe Hoover!" he snarled, whirling half around and swinging his sound hand in a savage stroke at the gambler's head. "Only fer you—an' when the pinch come, you dipped tail an' skunked clear out of it!"

With a neat ducking of his head, Showy Joe let that iron fist shoot over his shoulder, then

catching the hand he turned just far enough to bring Rusty Jack's arm across his slightly bent back, passing his own free arm around the crippled man's body, thus lending him double support.

It was all done so deftly, so smoothly, that even those who had been aiding Rusty Jack in his retreat could hardly realize that anything like a blow had been offered. Cripps himself was surprised into yielding, and for the moment forgot his crippled hand in listening to those hastily whispered words.

"What could I do with the whole crowd turned against us by your own fool' action, pard? Only make a bad mater worse. While *now*—I can and will help you to get even with that cursed fraud who calls himself—"

Rusty Jack gave a bitter groan, and made a drunken lurch.

"The devil's on his side fer luck! How else could— Cuss the gun that went back on me! Cuss the lead that—crippled!" as he once more lifted the wounded member before his wildly glaring eyes, then gave a howling curse of grieving rage as he shook off the gout of stiffening blood.

Using as much haste as he could command, Showy Joe Hoover sought aid for his injured chum, and by his whispered advice the doctor gave Rusty Jack a sedative potion disguised in a draught of whisky, then did his level best to convince his patient that so far from being crippled for life, his good right hand would be as sound and serviceable as ever in the course of a few weeks, if instructions were strictly followed.

Under this double dose, Rusty Jack grew calmer and more like his usual self, but as he watched the dressing of his wound, as he traced the course of the avenging bullet from knuckle to knuckle across the back of his hand; as he saw splinter after splinter of bone picked out and dropped as useless; as he saw how perfectly helpless his four fingers were; those very means helped him to realize the bitter truth.

"That's more'n a-plenty, Doc," he growled, cutting his physician short as the medical man tried to administer another dose. "I reckon it's part o' yer trade to lie, but I ain't *all* a fool. Now—will I even hev the full an' free use o' them hooks?"

"Well, I trust—"

"Will I ever hev the full an' free use o' them hooks, I ax ye?"

The doctor glanced across to where Showy Joe was standing, and the gambler gave a curt nod.

"I can't promise *that* much, Mr. Cripps, but—"

"Kin you promise anything? Kin you save my hand even?"

"I'll do my best, sir, but—to be perfectly frank—"

"You say, pard!" growled Rusty Jack, turning toward Hoover. "Doc cain't talk straight ef it was to kill him. You say: what's the show?"

"None at all for the fingers, pard. And I reckon you'll double your chances of coming through all right if you'd let Doc make a smooth stump of it."

"That means to whack off the hull hand?" slowly demanded the injured ruffian, glancing from face to face.

Hoover nodded assent, and thus set at liberty, the doctor volubly gave his reasons for so thinking. Rusty Jack was a hard drinker, and his blood was in a bad condition. If left with a simple dressing such as this, fever was almost certain to ensue, and with a wound of that description once inflamed, something even worse than amputation of the fingers might have to be endured.

So far Rusty Jack listened, but then his fierce passions broke loose, causing even Showy Joe to shrink away and instinctively look for an avenue of escape by flight should the storm take a more dangerous shape than words and curses alone.

"Ampetate the head o' me ef ye've got to ampetate ary thing," he panted, when the heat of his rage was past. But I'll stick to my hand as long's my hand'll stick to me! I'll never hev it cut off—never while that cussed Lad o' Luck is top o' the airth, anyway!"

Satisfied that nothing more could be done, after this outburst, the doctor gave the customary cautions, then went his way, leaving the two pards together.

But little more passed between them. Rusty Jack was divided between cursing Light-heart Lute and bemoaning his crippled hand, now fiercely swearing to never know rest or sleep until he had played even, then cursing his faithless pistol for not having sent its lead through brain instead of knuckles.

Showy Joe said just enough to suit his purpose, then took his departure, promising to send in some one to keep Rusty Jack company for the night. Cripps caught at those words, growling:

"I don't want no comp'ny, but—reckon them cussed pards hev run the old fraud off, yit?"

"Meaning Old Crazy?" smiled Showy Joe. "That's just what I'm going to find out, if I can. I hardly think the boys will let them give us all the slip, after what's happened, but—I'll come back as soon as I find out the state of the case, Rusty."

He was as good as his word, returning within the hour, to clearly describe the spot where the three friends had settled down for the night, adding with apparent carelessness:

"They act as though there was no hereafter, and from their merry laughter I hardly think their consciences will keep them from sleeping soundly for the rest of the night. Well, if Light-heart Lute might choke to death on one of his snores, maybe there'd be more luck left for the rest of us poor devils!"

Without waiting for a reply, Showy Joe left the room, laughing in his sleeve as he felt that all was going as well as could be expected.

"Rusty won't sleep, with that bunch of nettles for a pillow, and if Luther Larrimer does—well, I'll have enough of the boys looking on to prove a good *alibi* for Joseph, anyway!"

Left to himself, his wound, and the flask of strong brandy which Showy Joe had so considerably forgotten, Rusty Jack tried hard to bring his unruly brain under subjection, but with miserable success.

Those parting words kept ringing in his ears, the picture drawn by them would persist in dancing before his burning eyeballs.

Here he crouched, a cripple for life! He, who had depended for years on that good right hand to keep himself up and his enemies down. He, who had never admitted any other law than that of the strong right hand. And now—crippled!

"An' him out yender, laughin'! Him out yender, sleepin' like—"

Savage rage choked his voice, and to moisten his parched throat, he drained the flask, hurling it across the room with a vicious snarl of anger that it should be so soon exhausted.

But there had been enough to still further inflame his evil passions, and hotter grew his rage against Light-heart Lute, without whose audacious interference this awful calamity would never have befallen him.

"An' him sleepin'! Him laughin'! Him countin' on skimm'in' the yaller cream off o' the—An' me this way!" he half groaned, half snarled, holding up his bandaged hand, through every fiber of which a maddening pain was shooting and quivering until it seemed as though he must go raving distracted.

Once he drew the revolver which remained in his belt, staring into its grim muzzle, with thumb on hammer and finger on trigger. Would it not be better to end all with a single shot? Could what lay beyond the divide be worse than what he would have to endure here upon earth, now he was a helpless cripple?

Then, as a vision of the slumbering Lad of Luck flashed back on his distorted brain, Rusty Jack leveled the weapon at a blotch on the wall, not larger than a human heart. And as he saw how unwaveringly the silver bead held to its center, a low, ugly chuckle rose in his throat.

"Ef I *could* hold it so stiddy—an' on his black heart—an' let'er off with a stiddy pull, not jerk! Why not?"

In that one instant his evil resolve was taken, and though he lingered to repeat his motions: picking out different blotches on the wall, testing his nerves by aiming, now swiftly as for a snap shot, now deliberately as though taking aim at a motionless if not unconscious target, never again did Rusty Jack falter in his vicious resolution to fully avenge his mutilation before another sun should arise.

With any less terrible end in view, his actions would have seemed almost childish; with that, they were hideously repulsive.

Pulling his hat far over his eyes, and slipping both sling and bandaged hand under cover of his coat, Rusty Jack blew out the light and left the building.

The cool breeze from the hills caused his liquor and rage-inflamed brain to whirl dizzily for a few moments, but by leaning against the wall, in densest shadow, he quickly conquered this.

As soon as he felt steady enough, the wounded ruffian crept along under cover, avoiding every light, lying low whenever he caught sight of man or men passing along, wishing to leave town without any eyes noting his passage, though he

knew he could plead his crippled condition as an alibi should any ugly questions arise over the death of his hated enemy.

Although he had spoken with so much apparent carelessness, Showy Joe Hoover had taken care to make Rusty Jack fully understand where the pards had gone into camp with Old Crazy in charge, and the assassin need lose no time in idle search.

Clearing the town without meeting any inconvenient witness, Rusty Jack stole silently toward that point, his eyes roving restlessly around in all directions, for he felt almost certain that some of the gold-coveting gang would be keeping watch and ward lest their prey should once more give them the slip under cover of night, just as he had done on two other occasions; but if such watch was kept, it was so cunningly masked that he could not discover aught of it.

What matter? Even should he be detected in the act, who could or would blame him for playing even? It was simply natural: it was a life for a hand; only a cur would lie low without snapping back!

So Rusty Jack reasoned, if reasoning it could be called, with his blood on fire and his brain awl. But the instant he caught sight of the dimly glowing embers marking the little camp, his nerves grew steady, his brain cleared, and he lost sight of all else save his revenge.

It was not until after he had crept within short pistol range that he could distinguish one form from another; but then it was easy enough. No danger of confounding that trim, graceful figure with that of the giant chum, or that of the man clad in skins.

Creeping around until he could command a fair view of the Lucky Lad's left side, as he lay on the broad of his back with one arm doubled back beneath his head, Rusty Jack cocked and leveled his revolver.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SINGING DEATH.

His brain had never worked more clearly than it did in that awful minute when he felt that squirming coil beneath his arm, when he heard that angry skir-r-r, and caught sight of that lance-shaped head rising between his arm and his side; yet it was neither nerve nor reason that kept Light-heart Lute from leaping to his feet, or even moving a muscle of arm or body.

To do either would only insure a stroke from those poison-backed fangs, for swiftly as he might move, that stroke would come ten-fold more quickly.

He knew that, well enough. And, curiously enough the Lad of Luck recalled an experiment which he had once tried, never again to repeat it, however.

It all came back to him in that instant: how he had been discussing the actions of a rattlesnake with Poley, while watching the sluggish reptile as it crawled away toward its hole among the rocks.

"It hain't got no need o' eyes, as I see," the giant said. "I don't b'lieve it ever uses 'em when it comes to strikin'. Fer why: you lop off yen' critter's head, an' dast to tetch its tail 'ith on'y the tip o' yer finger, an' you cain't jerk back quick 'nough fer to keep it from bloodin' the hand o' ye!"

"Not with my arm at full stretch?"

"Not ef it was twenty foot long, an' chuck full o' chain lightnin', you couldn't git off 'thout a bloody hand," asserted Poley.

That was enough. Light-heart Lute at once killed the snake. He waited until its body was stretched out at full length, then touched its tail, jerking back his hand on the instant. But with incredible swiftness, that headless stump flashed backward, sending a thrill of horror through his every vein as it struck him squarely on the back of the hand!

All this flashed across Larrimer's brain in that single instant, but it was not the memory of this deadly swiftness that kept him from rolling away from that loathsome companionship. He was under a spell of some sort, and—Once more he recalled how Poley talked of men and animals being fascinated by the rattlesnake.

He had always doubted this fabled power. He had, more than once, tested it, while keeping beyond striking distance, of course, of the reptile he was experimenting with. And as often his skepticism had been confirmed. His only sensation was one of loathing: his sole impulse thus acquired was an instinct to slay.

With an odd longing to again test those fabled powers of fascination, Light-heart Lute kept his eyes fixed on that flat head as it gradually rose higher, more of the scaly body gliding up through the narrow opening between his arm

and his body. He caught those tiny, bead-like eyes fastened upon him. He could even distinguish the black-tipped tongue with its double extremity, running in and out, quivering sharply. But that was all. He felt none of the wild, weird symptoms so frequently met with in print, and so graphically repeated by Poley Applejohn.

Decidedly there was something wrong with that legend!

Inch by inch the snake drew its length from beneath that motionless arm, sending its body in a curve over the breast of the young man who was almost listlessly watching its movements by the dim light. Its shivering rattle no longer sounded, for the shell-armed tail had scant room in which to play, but its star-like eyes never once wavered in its gaze.

Surely there was no such thing as serpent fascination! And yet—why was he lying so motionless? Why did he feel no greater fear? Why was his busy brain unable to control his body?

For, despite the certainty that his slightest attempt to knock the snake from his breast would invite a poisonous wound, Light-heart Lute would surely have made that effort could he have made his muscles work his will.

Little by little the snake emerged from its uncomfortably close quarters, making a double curve on the bosom of the youth, the contact sending a strange, loathsome chill through garments to flesh, causing Light-heart Lute far more annoyance than the possible death that menaced him without cessation.

Then, when its tail was freed, the snake quickly formed a coil, arching its neck and causing its horny tail to vibrate so swiftly that the keenest eye could not keep track of its wavings, producing the sound which no combination of letters can rightly represent, and which the redskins have poetically named the singing death.

Then, for the first time since that strange ordeal began, Light-heart Lute felt fear!

With that sound the curious spell which had fallen upon him, was broken. For the first time he knew that his muscles were prepared to obey his brain, and never in all his life, though that had been eventful enough of late, had he stood nearer to death than in that instant.

It required all his will-power, all his marvelous nerve, to lie without motion, to resist that wild impulse to strike at that loathsome head and roll over, in vain hopes of thus escaping being bitten.

Most fortunately he was equal to the task, though an involuntary shiver crept through his body, seeming to turn his blood to ice in his veins. And with that freezing sensation came another curious thought; doubly curious under such perilous circumstances, but yet true.

He knew that the rattlesnake, like all others of its family, loved warmth and shunned coldness. It was probably for warmth that the reptile had crept close to his body, unnoticed while his brain was so busily thinking. The light might have attracted it, in the first place, but a snake fears fire even as it loves warmth, which would account for its crawling to that side of the body lying furthest from the glowing embers.

Then—this was his queer thought: If his body changed from warm to cold—and already his blood felt as though it was congealing—would not the snake abandon it for a warmer resting-place?

The odd fancy sent his stagnant blood flowing more freely, and Lightheart Lute could hardly smother a groan as he felt a glow of returning warmth throughout his person, from crown to sole!

At brief intervals the singing death rung out, and that ugly head was curved in readiness to shoot forward to deal its venomous stroke; but as Lightheart Lute lay without motion, the reptile seemed to regard him less suspiciously.

The rattle came less frequent and less loud, until only an occasional rustle was heard. The head lowered; the wavy half of that scaly body drew back to form a curve instead, and with a growing thrill of hope Lightheart Lute watched and waited.

He had no difficulty in doing the first, for his right arm was still bent backward, his hand forming a pillow, which lifted his head sufficiently for him to glance downward without seriously straining his eyes.

He breathed slow and gently, moving the muscles of his chest as little as possible, lest the serpent again grow angry. He saw that the center of that round body was slowly slipping to one side in a growing curve, reaching toward the ground beyond his rigid left arm. The snake was plainly about to desert its resting-place for some reason, though still suspicious, still watch-

ul, ever ready to bury its fangs into the face before it at the slightest motion.

Then—

At that precise instant, when his hope was returning, Lighthead Lute caught sight of a dimly outlined figure creeping along the ground only a few rods distant, crouching low, not unlike a wild beast, but yet unmistakably a human being.

As though by instinct the truth burst upon him. An instant later he had not the faintest doubt that this was either Rusty Jack or Joe Hoover coming to "play even."

The thought sent a thrill through his body, and even that slight motion was sufficient to anger the rattlesnake once more. Its head flew up and back, then darted forward until it almost touched the lowered chin of the young man, but luckily its body had been nearly too straightened out before for its stroke to reach its mark.

Still, with that curious instinct so swift, so odd, so unaccountable for any ordinary reasoning, Lighthead Lute understood this fact, and though he fully expected another more certain stroke, he was able to command his nerve, lying without even a tremor.

And though his eyes were still fixed upon the head of the snake, he could look beyond and still detect that crouching figure as it crept silently along through the shadows.

The snake only partially drew back its body, sounding its rattle faintly, then keeping motionless for a few moments to watch its victim. Another movement would surely be fatal, so far as poison could make it, for the serpent would never again miss its stroke. Two such bits of rare good luck seldom fall to the lot of one man.

Moving only his eyes, Lighthead Lute kept track of that phantom-like shape under the trees, losing it only for a second or two, and even then knowing just how far and how fast it had progressed, as well as just where to expect its next appearance.

He was able to do this, yet not once entirely losing sight of the rattlesnake, thanks to its change of position. And he knew that once more the lower half of its body was slowly seeking the ground.

The curve lengthened until only the tail and a short foot of the upper body rested on his form, held from slipping by the scales covering its spotted body. And then, with a faint, uneven rattle, the tail slipped down upon, then over his left arm as it lay by his side. And, inch by inch, its eyes glittering like beads of fire, its tongue running in and out with a quiver, that arrow-shaped head began to sink lower and lower until—from body to arm, from arm to ground!

For the first time since that terrible ordeal began, Lighthead Lute permitted his lungs to fairly fill themselves, breathing deeply, gratefully, though right well he knew that his peril was scarcely lessened, since the snake was still lying in coil, and fairly touching his arm where it rested on the ground.

Then, too, there was that prowling shadow!

For an instant his eyes had closed, to relieve the strain which had been put upon them, but with that memory his lids flew open, and he looked for the human shadow; to catch sight of it, stump-like, facing him on its knees and—

With one arm bent before its breast, serving as support to a cocked and leveled revolver.

Not more than twenty yards away! Kneeling at the edge of the narrow strip of dim moonlight, across which the assassin had seemingly feared to pass lest his intended victim should discover him too soon, and make a fight for his life!

So near the strip that the light fell across the muzzle, making the silver sight shine brightly!

Expecting death with each passing moment, yet afraid to stir lest those venomous fangs enter his flesh, Lighthead Lute closed his eyes and grimly clinched his teeth, awaiting the end.

Second after second—a full minute, which seemed an age—yet that death-report did not ring out, that deadly missile did not wing its way to heart or brain!

More difficult than ever was it for him to resist that awful temptation to roll swiftly over, risking a bite on the scant chance of cheating a shot; but Lighthead Lute proved equal to the task. And opening his lids, he looked forth, to see that human enemy creeping still nearer, the light dimly reflecting from a bared blade clinched between his bearded jaws!

He had been afraid to risk a shot by that uncertain light, or else he feared to arouse the other sleepers by burning powder. The knife would make less noise, and in a strong, steady hand would be even surer death.

Nearly closing his lids, Lighthead Lute waited, meaning to fight for his life when the crisis came, but fearing to stir before. And bit by bit the assassin crept closer, nearer, until—one more yard and—

His hairy hand extended, to touch the coiled snake, whose fangs were swiftly buried in that bloated face the same instant!

CHAPTER VII.

STILL THE FAVORITE OF FORTUNE.

LIGHT-HEART LUTE was never cooler, steadier, nerved in his life than when he lay motionless, watching through nearly closed lids the stealthy approach of his enemy.

He had long since recognized Rusty Jack Cripps, as much from his bandaged and sling-supported right hand as from face or figure, and from that fact he knew that, ugly though it was, the situation might have been much worse.

He could distinguish the bared knife gripped by the teeth of the assassin, and knew that there would have to be a momentary pause ere the sound hand could grip the handle and steady itself for the blow. And in that instant he intended to act.

If—

Would the "singing death" keep its coil without sounding its grim warning until the ruffian was nigh enough? Would its attention be engaged by Rusty Jack completely enough to permit him, Lighthead Lute, to roll over beyond its reach?

These thoughts were flashing across his brain, and his belief in the truth of his title was coming back to life with each passing second. Yet even he could not have hoped for what really followed.

The same instant that the serpent lanced forward, Lighthead Lute rolled swiftly away, leaping to his feet, pistol in hand, as Rusty Jack jerked back with a yell of horror, the snake clinging to his face with its long, curved fangs.

"On guard, Poley, but don't fire first!" cried the Lad of Luck, never more appropriately named than on that night.

"Help! save me! Whisky—gi' me whisky fer—I'm bit all to pieces!" howled Rusty Jack Cripps, staggering to his feet, using both sound and crippled hands to tear that writhing reptile from the coil it was flinging about his neck.

He broke off with a wild screech of mingled rage and terror as he tore the snake loose, hurling it to the earth with savage force before it could inflict another bite, crushing its head to pulp with one heavy heel, then reeling about like one drunken or with rank poison already seething through his veins.

He forgot what evil work he had attempted, though his intended victim was drawing closer, his free hand dropping some light fuel on the coals, causing a quick flame to spring up to light the scene.

He forgot his crippled hand. He could only remember that hideous snake, and the awful death which menaced him.

During those first few seconds Rusty Jack was little better than a madman, and his terror was so great that he lost all enmity for the Lad of Luck, begging him for whisky, for help, praying him to save his wretched life.

"The gang's a-comin', boss!" warningly rumbled Poley Applejohn, ever watchful for the interests of his chum and master, both in one.

"Shell I stan' 'em off a bit?"

Instead of giving such orders, the Lad of Luck cried out sharply, waving his hat toward the approaching figures:

"This way, boys! Somebody snake-bit, and needs help in a hurry!"

The men, a round dozen in number, came with a rush, and Lighthead Lute fell back a pace or two nearer his companions as he caught sight of the flashy gambler at their head. He hastily muttered:

"Hold 'em level, pard, but don't shoot unless it's to save life on our side. And keep an eye on Old Crazy, if—"

"I'm with you, heart, hand and shooter, sir!" came an unexpectedly clear, resolute voice, and Lute took time to flash one brief glance in that direction.

Old Crazy had sprung to his feet at that wild alarm, looking and acting entirely different from "the man without a head," in which character alone Larrimer had known him. In each hand he gripped a revolver, and it did not require a second look to show that he was both ready and willing to use them to good advantage.

"Luck forever, and it's all on our side!" laughed Lute, though his words were nearly drowned by the wild cries of the bitten ruffian

and the loud shout coming from the lips of Showy Joe Hoover.

"Foul play, lads!" the flashy gambler cried, with a fine show of indignation as he recognized his chum in that blindly reeling figure. "It's poor Rusty! They've butchered him again! Down with 'em, boys!"

"Steady, all!" rung out the clear, stern voice of the Lad of Luck. "Rusty Jack has bit himself with a rattler, and not a hand has been raised against him!"

"Save the hand of Providence!" supplemented Old Crazy.

"But thar's six han's hyar, an' every one o' them chuck-full, ef ye want to try rushin'," rumbled Poley, by way of cap-sheat.

"Whisky—gi' me whisky!" howled Rusty Jack, unheeding if he felt the pain caused by dashing his bandaged hand across his blinded eyes. "I'm bit! I'm p'izen! Caint' ye see how I'm all swellin' up an'— Oh, won't nobody try to help me nor nothin'?"

"It's all a cursed trick to do us out of the bonanza!" cried Joe Hoover, but shrinking visibly from those leveled weapons. "Down them first, then help Rusty if you can!"

"Button up, Showy Joe!" sharply spoke the Lad of Luck, adding: "If he keeps chipping on that line, call him down, pard!"

"You bet I will: fer keeps, too!" grimly rumbled the giant.

There came a momentary pause, during which Lighthead Lute took a hasty survey of the men, now in front of the gambler. He recognized several of their number, and knew that they were listed among the "tough nuts" of town.

If they had been led by one who could act as boldly as he had talked, beyond a doubt they would have risked a rush, despite those ready revolvers, killing the two caums and gaining possession of the old prospector at one and the same time. But, lacking such a head, they were more readily managed than honest men would have been.

"Showy Joe lies, and you know it, gentlemen," Lighthead Lute said, in clear cool tones. "You were near enough to see it all: too near for a shot or a blow to have escaped your eyes and ears. So—will you talk white if I promise to save your life, Rusty Jack?"

"Save me—only save me from—I'm all swellin' up!" hoarsely gasped the miserable wretch, staggering closer to the Lad of Luck, dropping to his knees, and only kept from embracing those of Larrimer by a backward step on his part.

"What were you creeping up toward me as I lay sleeping, for?"

"To stick—I didn't dast resk a shot, fer—Whisky!"

"You meant to murder me, then?" sternly persisted Larrimer, resolved to have every cloud brushed aside. "Tell the truth, or whisky won't save you, poor devil!"

"Yes, I meant to stab ye through fer cripplin' me all up!" the terrified knave moaned, yet loud enough for his mates beyond to catch each word as it passed his lips.

"You hear his free confession, gentlemen?" again employing the much abused title, for which no one is a greater stickler than your genuine knave. "I was lying here, without a thought of harming him, while he was creeping up to stab me under cover of sleep. He must have put a hand on a rattler, for—"

"Yes, I did!" broke in Rusty Jack, with a howl. "An' the durn imp bit me in the face—bit me all over! An' I'm swellin' up 'ith the p'izen ontel— Gi' me whisky, fer the love o'— Gi' me whisky! Don't let me die like a— Whisky—whisky, ye devils!"

"Are you satisfied that he has only himself to blame, gentlemen?" persisted Lighthead Lute, replacing the pistols in his belt, and taking the nearly crazed ruffian by one of his wildly waving arms. "If so, give me your vote, for unless something is done in a hurry, Rusty Jack is a gone 'coon, sure enough!"

"Yes, yes! 'twas all my fault! I 'lowed to stab him while he was snoozin', an' so—an' so do somethin' fer me, boss, ef there's a heart into ye! Save me, fer I hain't no ways fit to die—an' sech a death!"

"Stand back and keep ready to block any trick, Poley," swiftly warned the Lad of Luck; then adding in louder tones: "Come forward, you who carry bottles, and lend a hand, please! Try to simmer down, Rusty, for you're only helping the poison to do its work by keeping up such a mighty stew. We'll save you, if it's in the book, never fear!"

Several of the men came forward, each holding out a bottle or flask as a flag of truce.

Rusty Jack caught at the nearest, and only dropping it when the last drop of liquid fire rolled down his throat.

Poley and Old Crazy stood on guard with armed hands, but Lighthead Luke showed no suspicion while cutting the rattlesnake into short lengths, and splitting them open with his keen knife.

He took a section of the lower body, and after bidding Rusty Jack stand firm and grit his teeth, he found the twin punctures made by the fangs in that puffy cheek, then cut deeply across each tiny wound, repeating the action across each in a downward direction. It was too late to think of extracting all the poison by cutting out a chunk of flesh, and even his humanity did not go so far as to lead him to aid the flowing blood by applying his lips in suction.

The scarifying complete, Lute turned back the separated edges of the length of snake-body, covering the wound with the raw flesh, binding it in place with a strip cut and torn from Rusty Jack's shirt.

"It's the best we can do, lacking a chicken or a big bird," he explained to the eagerly watching miners. "Take the rest of the snake along, and change the poultice every ten minutes until he begins to show drunk. Fill him up with whisky; he can't swallow enough to hurt him, for if he's to be saved, he'll soon be too drunk to swallow more."

"Will I—kin you save me, boss?" huskily moaned Cripps.

"I've done my level best, Jack, but the result depends on a far higher Power than mine or yours," was the grave response.

There was a brief silence, then one of the miners, thinking more of earthly than of spiritual powers, cried out sharply:

"Three cheers for the Lad o' Luck, anyway! Whoop 'em up, mates!"

Poley Applejohn's mighty voice led the cheering, and Lighthead Luke repeatedly bowed his thanks, hat in hand, a grave, serious smile playing about his lips.

He was in nowise vainglorious, but he could not honestly disclaim that title, after what had happened that day and night. Twice had he been at the point of death by the hands of that miserable man, now so helpless himself. At least once he had escaped death from those poison-laden fangs as by a miracle. Then, why should he disclaim being a favorite of fortune?

After the echoes of those cheers had died away, there came a slightly awkward silence. Given a couple of whisky flasks, Rusty Jack Cripps was frantically seeking renewed life in drunkenness. Showy Joe Hoover had slunk out of sight. But the remaining miners were clearly loth to take their departure without having come to a more perfect understanding.

Lighthead Luke had no difficulty in reaching the truth, but he was in no hurry to break the silence, though his answer would be ready when called for.

With a seemingly careless glance he saw that Old Crazy was still on the alert, looking and acting very differently from his manner when rescued from Rusty Jack's rope the past evening. But—would the veteran be any the less tenacious of his coveted secret?

"I say, Lighthead!" abruptly cried one of the dozen, drawing a bit in front of his mates, the ruddy glow of the fire revealing an embarrassed yet resolute expression on his rugged face.

"Well, Bat Johnson, why don't you keep on saying?" easily laughed the favorite of fortune.

"Ef we take Rusty back to town, whar he kin be better keered fer, you won't try fer to give us all the slip? You won't run the old 'un off 'thout givin' us a show to talk it over, ca'mly, by day?"

"I'll never run him off, as you put it, Bat Johnson. I hold no claim over him, beyond that of a feeling of friendship for one I saw being shamefully abused by a gang of tough nuts."

"But you be his fri'nd, I reckon?"

"And proud to claim that title, if he will grant it, too!"

"Then you want to hold him right whar he is now, at least ontel day comes, or you'll turn up one fri'nd short—an' that's flat!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WHICH IS THE CRAZIEST?

"AM I to take that as a threat, Mr. Johnson?"

"You're to take it as gospel truth, anyway," was the firm response. "We ain't huntin' no racket 'ith you, mind ye, Lucky Lad, fer—"

"You have a sample warning right before your eyes, Bat," grimly laughed Larrimer, nodding toward Rusty Jack Cripps.

"An' tain't one sech as we'll fergit in a hurry, nuther," was the frank reply. "But, all the

same, we're holdin' close to the line we've marked out; an' that leads us straight to the bonanzy Old Crazy bez bin workin' all these years."

"In still plainer words?"

"You play white, an' we'll do the same. Keep the old 'un hyar anyway until day comes. Then we'll be better fixed on both sides fer a sober talk-it-over. Ef not—waal, I kin give it to ye with the bark on ef nothin' shorter'll satisfy ye, Lad."

"Don't be mealy-mouthed, Mr. Johnson."

"That ain't my natur'. Ef I'm anythin', I'm a plain talker, 'thout any frills or circumbendibusses. An' so—this is the idee: We'll agree, all of us, an' sign sech a 'greement ef ye want, to give Old Crazy his pick o' claims on the lead, lawful size. Ef he's got ary kin or fambly, he kin take next choice fer each one o' them, afore the rest o' us stakes out the rest. But—ef he wants to play hog, as he bes bin a-playin' of it all these long times—ef he tries to skin out an' skin us, es he's done twicet afore—then we'll freeze fast to the hull blamed business, 'cept ground 'nough to kiver him over in white-man fashion!"

There was a brief silence after this grim conclusion. Lighthead Luke looked toward Old Crazy, but his head was bowed and his eyes downcast. If he had aught to offer, the right time had not yet come.

Of course Poley Applejohn was silent. He never spoke first, when Lighthead was at the helm.

"You don't insist on an answer this minute, then, Mr. Johnson?"

"Not ef you ain't ready to give it, sir. We'll wait ontel day, ef you want a chance to talk it over 'ith the old gent."

"All right. Call again with the sun, gentlemen, and we'll be right on hand. I pledge you my word to that effect."

"That's plenty, Lucky Lad! Come, boys; le's git Rusty back to town afore he's too drunk to help navigate him own self!" cheerily cried Johnson, greatly relieved at the outcome.

There was little thought of sleeping left behind them when they passed out of sight, assisting the already half drunken cripple along.

Lighthead Luke freshened up the fire, then took a steady look at the face of the veteran. It was dark and troubled, but there was no return of that wild, insane light, and for the time being the old man seemed fully capable of listening to and giving back reason.

Satisfied on this point, Larrimer frankly gave his opinion as to the wisest, if not the only course left open for them.

"I passed my word that you would remain here until the sun rose, because I knew that if I refused, those fellows would watch us like hungry cats watching a mouse. Even if they didn't try to make still surer of their game by shooting us down, and capturing you again."

Then he went on to give reasons for thinking it best to yield up a part in order to save the rest. The old trick of fleeing by night was out of the question. Unless Old Crazy yielded to the general demand before another night came, he would be killed for what wealth he now carried on his person, or else would be taken captive and forced to act as guide to his rich strike.

"Now I'll tell you what we'll do, if you'll try to trust in us. We are free lances, Poley and I, and we've taken a powerful fancy to you. I'll tell you just why, before long."

"Promise to show the way to your bonanza, and we'll pledge our honor to see that you have both time and opportunity to fairly stake out a legal claim for yourself, and another for Chiquita, before any other man strikes blow with pick or turns a clod with shovel. And if you like, we'll stand by to see that you are neither of you disturbed while your claims are being worked out. Isn't that fair?"

"It would be, if I was an ordinary being," was the slow, seemingly difficult reply. "But—there's a curse hanging over me—a bitter black curse! And all who come beneath its shadow are doomed—doomed beyond salvation!"

"I'll put my luck against the shadow," softly laughed Lighthead Luke. "And as for the other fellows—well, give them fair warning, and let them rustle for their own lives after. How's that, daddy?"

The victory was not yet won, though Lute felt greatly encouraged to find Old Crazy even listening to his arguments. And he kept hammering away, fearing to postpone the matter lest that old madness return to ruin all his hopes. And before the day dawned, Old Crazy had yielded a reluctant consent!

With the first rays of the rising sun, Bat Johnson came back at the head of his party, to receive the answer he had demanded. And when this was given, great was their joy thereat, despite the gloomy words which fell from the lips of the old prospector.

"You show us the bonanzy, an' we'll resk the bad luck," laughed Johnson, in high glee.

As for Lighthead Luke, he made but one stipulation: Showy Joe Hoover was to be counted out of the game altogether.

Each man was sworn to secrecy and was to do all possible to throw outsiders off the scent, at least long enough to permit them to have their claims fairly staked out and defined before the to-be-expected rush should follow. Each man was to claim that Old Crazy was still holding out for more time, while they secretly made their preparations for a long and toilsome journey to the bonanza. Then, when the shades of night were come again, they were to steal away from town and rendezvous at a given point, from thence to take up their march.

One week only.

The gold-hunters had halted to give an hour or two of the extreme heat of the day to rest and a hearty meal, under shade of a little tree-clump, at the edge of which broke forth a spring, the cool waters of which proved a grateful boon indeed to those parched lips and dust-lined throats.

That week had wrought more or less change in each one of the members of the little band, but on none did the time show greater change than in Lighthead Luke.

There was a look of anxious doubt, of dejection, even, in his naturally bright and cheerful face as he lay apart from the rest of the company. He seemed to have grown years older during that short span, and fatigue alone could not be blamed with that alteration.

His blue eyes were riveted upon the bowed form of Old Crazy; his face was hidden from view by his position; and right there lay the prime cause of all this change in Lighthead.

He was asking himself a question even now, which he had asked himself times without number during those seven days of toilsome journeying: which was the craziest, Old Crazy or himself?

As before hinted, Lighthead Luke was not wandering through the gold country without an end in view, though that end seemed a pitifully faint and far-away goal, if not altogether a delusion born of a distempered fancy.

Years ago, when he was little more than an infant, his father had caught the gold fever and bade his young wife and babe good-by, gayly promising to come back to them in a short time, with riches enough to maintain them in comfort if not in splendor for the remainder of their lives.

At long intervals word came home from the wanderer, at first hopeful in spite of poor success in amassing the fortune of which he had so easily boasted in advance, then—the last message—full of glowing hope, for at last he "had struck it rich!"

After that, silence complete!

The years passed on, and with them died the hopes of the fading wife and mother. She clung to hope long after all others had abandoned it, but then, as death grew closer to herself, she, too, believed that the loved one had gone on before.

But while waiting and watching, hoping against hope, that mother had sowed seed which was destined to bear fruit in after years. She spent hours talking to little Luther about his father, and he time and again kissed away her tears, declaring that "when I'm a big man" he would go bring his papa home once more.

Luther Larrimer never forgot those boyish pledges, even after his mother was buried. And in later years, when he was able to act as his own master, he set out on his mission, first going to the mining town bearing the same name as that upon the last letter written by Stephen Larrimer to his wife, Hetty.

Time had blotted out all memory of the missing miner, and Lighthead Luke failed to find even the slightest trace of his father. Unless—and in that lay the wild fancy which had so strongly drawn him toward Old Crazy—the wild, haggard, bony figure which the more daring prospectors occasionally caught a glimpse of in the mountains, was that father, crazed by accident or privations such as gold-hunters seem peculiarly liable to.

That was more than two years ago, and Lighthead Luke had never abandoned his wild hope

of one day discovering his father in some such demented being, though up to the day when he first met Old Crazy, he had never come across any such being.

He fancied he had caught a clue when Old Crazy showed such interest in music, and to clinch it, if possible, he caused Poley Applejohn to play that old song, which his mother had told him was a great favorite with his father.

He was puzzled by the curious effect produced that night, and had every night since caused Poley to repeat the music: never with that or any other particular result, however.

He had closely questioned Old Crazy as to his real name, his past life, and associations, but with little reward to him. It was hard to draw a word from the gloomy old fellow, and those only protested that he had lost all memory of the past when he lost his head!

Time and again he had called himself a fool for entertaining such a preposterous idea any longer, yet he found it impossible to drive away the fancy that this was indeed his long missing father. And when he consulted the faded daguerreotype which his mother had bequeathed to him, he felt still more undecided.

The features were not so utterly dissimilar, though one represented a young, full-faced man in the pride of his strength and health, while the other was sharpened and rendered gaunt by care and trouble, and advancing age. Yet—if Old Crazy was indeed that father, he should now be just in the prime of middle-age, while the old prospector seemed at least three-score years of age!

Poley Applejohn, ever thoughtful where his chum was concerned, now broke in upon that painful reverie, bringing warm meat and a hearty appetite to aid in clearing his share of the bark platter. And once more Light-heart Lute threw off that wearing burden of care and doubt, talking and laughing like his old self.

"A body'd reckon we was all toilin' onward to our graves, jedgin' from the look o' him!" rumbled Poley, with a jerk of his head toward Old Crazy by way of explanation. "An' yit he says we'll git thar afore sunset—ef ever!"

This hope helped to tear the gold-hunters away from the doubly grateful shade and spring, much earlier than would have been the case had their longed-for goal been more distant. Their spirits rose in direct ratio with the falling of that of Old Crazy, and barring a few stray doubts that his dejection might be caused by possible exposure and punishment for leading them far astray, the party pressed on merrily, forgetting fatigue and sore bones in their golden visions.

As the sun declined they entered a long, narrow valley, winding up it with Old Crazy in the lead, never one of them all suspecting the death whose shadow was already falling over their doomed heads.

Until—a volley of bullets and arrows whizzed through the air, and wild, savage yells rung out; but all did not hear these sounds, and the Lad of Luck was among that number!

CHAPTER IX.

BEFORE CHIEF BAD HAND.

Old Crazy was in the lead, as usual, and so perfectly was that death-trap masked up to the very instant set for its springing, that even he must have been completely in the dark as to what was coming.

Just at that point the practical portion of the narrow valley grew more contracted, causing the gold-hunters to string out almost in single file, though just before what may be called "the dead line" was reached, there was ample room for double their number to walk abreast.

In these facts might have been found the explanation why Old Crazy, the leader, escaped both arrow and bullet when the trap was fairly sprung. Yet—could it explain his hoarse, agonized cry of what seemed remorse as he lifted his clasped hands above his head, glancing back at the reeling, falling forms of his little company?

"Blind—blind! Why would ye not listen to my warning?"

Two half-naked figures sprung from cover of the rocks and grasped Old Crazy, each by an arm, hurriedly speaking a few words in their own tongue. Each was armed, but neither menaced him with a weapon, nor did the strange being offer to strike or break away.

They hurried him off through the rocks, pushing him a little in advance, and though Old Crazy tried to glance backward several times, just as often did the Indians draw close together so as to form a living fence between the leader and his ill-fated following.

There were yells ringing out fiercely, with an occasional scattering shot, as though the victors were trying to drop a fugitive with greater ease to themselves than by running him down in the first place; but even to his dulled, almost stupefied brain there could be no doubt as to how the affair must terminate.

The two Ute braves hurried him forward, plunging into a narrow cut through the frowning rocks, the walls of which quickly smothered all sounds coming from that scene of death.

Beyond the first fierce grasp, and the force without which they could not well keep him in as speedy motion as they seemed to deem essential, the savages had used Old Crazy more as a friend than an enemy. The moment they were clearly out of range of the fight, if fight it could be called, they replaced their weapons in their girdles, still further betraying their confidence by permitting the old miner to retain his pistols and the Winchester which hung across his back by a sling.

"The curse! The shadow of death! Poor fools!" his voice growing choked and husky. "I warned ye, but ye heeded not!"

The braves interchanged swift looks, then one of them tightened his grip a bit by way of calling attention, speaking in the Ute tongue:

"It is not time to talk, now. Save your breath for the ears of Chief Bad Hand, father."

Old Crazy gave a sudden start that took his arms out of those brown hands, but he made no attempt to escape, nor touched a weapon. He brushed a hand across his eyes, staring wildly, confusedly at the braves, like one rudely roused from slumber.

"Onah! Muruss! What does— Merciful Heaven!" his hands clasping tightly over his eyes, bowing his head, while a convulsive shudder ran through his gaunt frame.

"What is, must be," tersely uttered one of the Utes, renewing his friendly yet firm grip on an arm. "Come, father, Chief Bad Hand is waiting."

As before, Old Crazy offered no resistance, permitting his two guards to impel him whither they listed, but still there was a difference. Then he seemed under the spell which had enveloped him for two full days past—ever since the gold-hunters forced him to admit that they were rapidly drawing near the spot where they might feast their eyes on the long-talked-of bonanza.

"If the black shadow of death does not close down before!"

They laughed at his gloomy conclusion then, but now—

"Blotted from the face of the earth, and all through me!" he groaned, hot tears coming into his aching eyes—for the first time in many a long and dreary year.

"Talk is bad; be still!" harshly spoke one of his guards, for the first time menacing the veteran with a weapon.

A bright light flashed into the old man's eyes, but only for an instant. Then he bowed his head in submission, and walked on as their hands indicated their wish.

He had left death lying behind him. It was more than probable that death was awaiting him at the end of that rapid journey. But he had no right to anticipate the blow, for another's sake if not his own.

What had happened to her—his little Chiquita? If Chief Bad Hand had discovered his treachery—for treachery it surely would be termed, his guiding armed white men into that forbidden region—had or would he spare the daughter where he punished the parent?

In his growing anxiety Old Crazy ignored that last harsh warning, asking his guards if any other captive was before Chief Bad Hand; but neither brave replied in words. They simply menaced him with the blunt ends of their hatchets, and forced him on at a still more rapid pace.

Fearing the worst for the one living being on earth whom he really loved, Old Crazy forgot all else in his feverish anxiety to learn what lay before him—not the worst, for he was praying that it might be best!

Once or twice a brief memory of Light-heart Lute—of whom his last glimpse had been a sickening one—came to his restless brain, but even the affection which he had begun to feel for the young man whose cool nerve had saved him from the rope, was not powerful enough to keep his thoughts long away from Little Chiquita.

Little by little his brain was growing clearer, and warned by the unusual harshness shown him by the Utes, Old Crazy felt convinced that a perilous ordeal awaited him when brought before Chief Bad Hand.

He cared comparatively little for himself, though, despite all drawbacks, life was well worth making a stout fight for; but should he be found guilty, and come under condemnation, would not Little Chiquita also have to suffer?

It was this dread thought that helped to clear his brain and steady his nerves, and though hardly an hour elapsed before the two Ute braves brought him to a wild, romantic-seeming retreat where nearly a score lodges were pitched, that time was sufficient for the veteran to rally and form at least an outline of his defense.

He was marched directly to the largest lodge in the secluded little valley, before the turned-back flap of which was seated an Indian, engaged in smoking his pipe.

Neither guard nor prisoner spoke, standing with bowed heads, the picture of humility, awaiting the pleasure of this wrinkled, dried-up and sun-baked anatomy, who, on his part, never deigned them a glance as he slowly puffed on, seemingly ignorant of their existence.

Without looking at that withered face—a skull over which the dark skin hung in ugly folds—the captive could hardly have mistaken him for other than the chief, since the crippled member which had first suggested the name which afterward became famous, or infamous, according to the color of those who judged, lay plainly before his downcast eyes.

The left hand of the chief had hardly grown since birth, though the arm, from wrist upward, was almost normal in its development. The slender fingers were withered and curved like the claws of an eagle, each one tipped with claws—one could hardly term them nails—of horn, pointed, strong, sharp enough to pierce leather.

The "bad hand" was curled around the feathered stem of his pipe, able to manage that, though of little service in toil or war.

Not until the bowl was emptied of all but ashes, did Chief Bad Hand lift his eyes or his voice, or by aught else give token that he was aware of the return of the guards with their prisoner.

"Well?"

"It is well, oh, chief," in unison responded the Utes, bending their heads still lower, keeping them thus until their master waved his withered hand as a token that the bonds of etiquette were loosened.

"Well?"

One of the braves tersely but clearly told how the pale-faces had walked blindly into the death-trap. Then, stepping back a pace, he gave way for his brother to tell how they had captured Old Crazy and hurried him without delay to the presence of their mighty chief.

Neither chief nor prisoner interposed a word, and it would have been no easy task to decide which one was the least moved, judging from their faces.

When the second brave ceased speaking, there was a brief silence, broken at length by Chief Bad Hand, for the third time pronouncing that crisp monosyllable, this time directing it toward Old Crazy, and keeping it company with a keen, almost fierce gaze.

"Of what am I accused, Chief Bad Hand?" coldly demanded the prisoner, unflinchingly meeting that gaze with one just as steady if veiled with respect due his power over life and death.

"Of being double-tongued. Of being false to your word, and treacherous to those who drew you back to life when the jaws of death had claimed you as its prey," croaked the living skeleton, his bead-like eyes glittering like those of an angered serpent.

"Who accuses me, oh chief?"

"We saw what we saw, and Chief Bad Hand has heard our words," the Ute braves gravely chanted in company.

"I am waiting for your words, Sick Brain," nodded the chief.

Old Crazy paused long enough to collect his thoughts, for he knew that on his story depended his life or death. Judge, jury and executioner was before him, all crowded into that wrinkled hide!

Clearly, using no more words than the case strictly demanded, yet omitting nothing that could assist in clearing him of that grave charge, Old Crazy told his story.

He admitted that he had pledged his word never to betray to men of his own color, the spot where he procured his yellow dust, and he affirmed that he had kept that oath as sacredly as possible.

"Then my children spoke lies when they said Sick Brain was taken at the head of armed pale-faces?"

"They spoke truth, Chief Bad Hand, yet I am not false to my oath," quickly replied Old Crazy.

"The pale-faces knew not whither I was leading them, for—"

"Yet you were leading them?"

"To their death—yes!" with desperate energy, speaking rapidly in his growing dread lest Chief Bad Hand refuse to listen longer, now that fatal fact had been proven by his own lips. "If I was a traitor to the Utes and to my pledge, would I not have opened their eyes in time to cheat the death-trap? Would I have led them blindfold into the snare, without giving them a chance to strike back when death called aloud?"

"You led them here. That is enough."

He lifted his withered claw-hand, but as the two braves grasped the old man, he fiercely hurled them aside, as though they had been no more than puny children, springing forward and catching the chief by both hands, then swiftly adding:

"Hear before you punish, oh chief! Could I act more wisely? The pale-faces saw my gold, and swore that they must have a share, or I should die like a dog! They swore to follow my trail though it lasted for years, and led them clear around the earth. If they had—if I had kept my lips sealed, they would have made their oath good. Then—they would have come with all eyes open, ready to strike first in place of falling without time to even give the death-cry."

"Was it not better so, Chief Bad Hand? Was it not wisdom to close their eyes with cunning lies and empty promises, leading them to the slaughter with neither sight in their eyes nor weapons in their hands? Could I have acted more wisely for my brothers, the Utes?"

"You could have died there, where the pale-faces found you," was the grim retort. "You would have died with a straight tongue, and that would have been wise."

CHAPTER X.

LITTLE CHIQUITA.

TINY beads of cold sweat started out on the temples of the old man as he listened to those cold, pitiless words, but even yet he would not despair, for he felt that more than his own life was at stake.

"Which was best, oh, chief? To let the pale-faces follow the trail of my mule back through all its windings, or lead them to death with their eyes shut?"

"Neither. A wise man would have died rather than come so far to find a worse death. A wise man would leave no trail for the eyes of an enemy to follow, whether of two feet or four."

"I am not wise, Chief Bad Hand. You gave me the name of Sick Brain, because the hand of the Great Spirit has touched my wits, and covered them over with a cloud. I have no head, but I have a heart, and my little Chiquita has another! Her heart is bound to mine with thongs of love, and I felt them pulling—pulling too hard for me to hold back longer than I did! So—I could not die, leaving her to fade away with grief at my staying away!"

"Will it make her heart glad to see you die?" coldly retorted the chief.

"No! no! he shall not die! My life—my father!"

Sharp, almost in a shriek came those words, and the next instant a girl sprung forward, winding her bare arms about the neck of Old Crazy, kissing his lips, then hiding her face in his neck, sobbing violently.

Chief Bad Hand never moved a muscle, though it was clear enough that he did not expect such an interruption. Sitting still, he coldly gazed at the agitated pair, while the two warriors waited his commands, their eyes riveted upon his immobile visage.

"Little Chiquita!" muttered Old Crazy, laying a cheek on that dark head, his own face showing ghastly pale by contrast. "Why did you come? Why did you—"

"He brought me—Little Bird!" with almost fierce scorn, giving emphasis to the name as her head lifted and her eyes met his. "I could have killed him, then, but now—I am glad—so glad, father!"

"And I—I never thought to see the day I'd be sorry to see you, my little girl!" brokenly muttered Old Crazy, vainly striving to conquer his powerful emotions, for her sake more than for his own. "You have come—to see—my death, Chiquita!"

Another sharp cry of mingled distress broke from her red lips, and little Chiquita turned toward Chief Bad Hand, shaking a tiny fist in his face, as she panted:

"He must not—you shall not kill him, chief!"

"That is for the men to decide, not squaws,"

coldly spoke the chief, nodding his head as a signal to the two braves.

They instantly grasped Old Crazy by the arms, but Little Chiquita sprung to the rescue, fierce as an untamed wild-cat, and actually freed her father from their grip. But then Old Crazy spoke quickly, bidding her submit, trusting to time. And then, choking back her sobs, Little Chiquita followed the prisoner and his guards to the lodge set apart for their safe-keeping.

Any attempt at escape would have been worse than useless, for while no other Utes had approached Chief Bad Hand's lodge, there were many squaws and over a dozen armed braves within eye-shot, ready and on the alert, only awaiting a call.

One of these braves, a short, compactly-built, yet wiry fellow, came forward at Oonah's signal, taking up his station before the front of the prison lodge.

"Strike swift and sure, if Sick Brain tries to escape," was the terse instructions given the sentinel.

"Little Bird hears and will obey. And the squaw?"

"Could you strike her, too?"

"If the chief say strike, yes."

"The chief has said it!" grimly nodded Oonah, turning away toward the lodge where Chief Bad Hand still sat motionless.

The prisoners stood silent, listening to these words, and while Old Crazy bowed his head dejectedly, like one abandoning all hope, Little Chiquita shook her clinched fist toward the shadow of Little Bird, a Spanish oath hissing through her red lips.

The light inside the lodge was dim, for the sun had just set, but what little there was showed a more than comely picture, even though rage and hatred partially disfigured that young face.

Despite her hair, black as midnight and falling straight, without the slightest tendency to curl, even at the tips, and her dark complexion, it was easy to see that more white than red-skin blood flowed through the veins of this girl whom Old Crazy called daughter.

In fact, Little Chiquita was a quarter-blood, her mother having been a half-breed, her father of unmixed white blood.

To this preponderance of white blood Little Chiquita owed her claims to beauty and regularity of feature, for, despite all the romantic writers, a really "beautiful princess" yet remains to be found in truth.

Her age could not have been over sixteen or seventeen years, though a wild, free, out-door life had developed her figure far beyond the average, and as she stood now, silently defying the warrior whom she had grown to hate with all the fervor of her wild nature, Little Chiquita formed a rarely attractive picture.

That defiant attitude lasted only for a single breath, then the really tender-hearted, loving child, turned to comfort her father, who was nearly stupefied with grief, for her, not himself.

She induced him to sink down upon the rude bed of hides near the rear of the lodge, and after a time calmed him sufficiently to explain how he had fallen into such trouble and disgrace with Chief Bad Hand.

In turn, Little Chiquita explained her presence in the Ute village when Old Crazy had believed her safely hidden in their secret retreat, patiently awaiting his home-coming.

Little Bird had ferreted her out, taking her by surprise before she could make use of either bow or knife, bringing her to the village, after trying his best—worst, Little Chiquita called it—to win her consent to enter his lodge as his squaw.

"You can read my answer on his ugly lips, father," she laughed, softly, doubling up her little hand and gazing almost affectionately at her dimpled knuckles. "Well for the dog that I had no more deadly weapon with which to cut his foul speech short!"

Old Crazy flamed up a bit at this, but Little Chiquita found it easy enough to check his impulse to rush forth to punish the presumptuous Ute lover. Indeed, too easy, in fact, for the poor fellow seemed falling into one of those curious spells, half-asleep, half-stupor, similar to the one which had so puzzled Light-heart a week before.

As darkness settled over the village, Little Bird entered the lodge for the purpose of kindling a rude sort of torch; a clumsy earthen vessel, filled with fat and tightly twisted reeds. By this dim, smoking light he gave a glance at his prisoners, seeing that Old Crazy was lying back with the regular breathings of one soundly

sleeping, while Little Chiquita was arranging a bed for herself near her father.

She completed this, and even more; shaping a roll of skins about her own size, which she covered with the same blanket that masked her own shapely figure. And thus she lay, with only an eye exposed, until Little Bird thrust his head inside for another inspection.

He gave a grunt, whether of satisfaction or of disgust, can only be surmised, then withdrew, standing rigidly erect before the prison-lodge, leaning on his long, feather-bedecked lance.

No sooner had this come to pass, than Little Chiquita silently slipped back of that roll of skins, replacing the cover carefully, then removing one of the pegs holding the lower edge of the lodge closely to the ground. Slipping under the skin, she crept noiselessly away, heading for the council-lodge where she felt morally certain Chief Bad Hand and his warriors were even then deciding the fate of Old Crazy and herself.

Little Chiquita was right in this belief, as she shortly proved by virtue of her keen sense of hearing, after her Indian training had enabled her to reach the rear of the council-lodge undetected by the brave on guard before the structure.

Had this been a regular town, instead of a temporary abiding place during a pause in their summer holiday, Little Chiquita would have found her task far more difficult, if not impracticable. But now, with by far the greater portion of their force away at the death-trap, the braves remaining—Bad Hand was the sole chief—were hardly numerous enough to form a respectable circle around the council-fire, without detailing a force to patrol and keep off intruders.

The lodge, too, was but of single walls, formed of skins, with here and there a crevice where sinews had yielded, through which shone a dull red light. Little Chiquita avoided these cracks, preferring to trust to her ears, rather than run any unnecessary risk of discovery.

Chief Bad Hand was talking when she began to listen, and after his cold, pitiless speech, there was no use in lingering longer. His voice was raised for death, and it was hardly likely that any considerable number of the braves would antagonize him in that sanguinary decision, despite their traditional reluctance to injure one on whose brain the Great Spirit had seen fit to place a blighting finger.

Yet Chief Bad Hand did not altogether ignore superstition, and Little Chiquita shivered with mingled hatred and horror as she drank in his cold, monotonous speech.

Sick Brain had broken his vow, and proved treacherous by leading an armed band of pale-faces into the heart of the Ute country. For that he must pay the penalty, even though their hands were forbidden to shed his blood. There were other deaths, and other methods of punishing traitors. One of them was by the will of the Great Spirit himself.

"We will not kill either Sick Brain or Chiquita. We will simply put them in a lodge, and seal it up, leaving them to live or die, just as the Great Spirit sees fit."

In other words, to linger in agony and until thirst and hunger ate away their lives!

It was hardly likely that this sentence would be changed or modified, since the chief had formulated it, but Chief Bad Hand had been the first to speak, and all the others remained to be heard; so Little Chiquita, as she crept silently away from the council-lodge, knew that a certain length of grace remained, which might—*which must be improved!*

She regained the prison-lodge in the same manner of leaving it, and although he had twice thrust his head inside for a look, Little Bird never suspected the cunning trick which had been played upon himself.

Not a little to her dismay, Little Chiquita found Old Crazy lying as she had left him, in a strange sort of stupor, the like of which she had known in the past to last for many hours without a break. If it should be so now! When each passing moment was worth an hour of ordinary time!

There was little encouragement in the fact that he murmured indistinctly in response to her gentle shaking, and then, swiftly going over the past, weighing the present, fully realizing how much depended on prompt and sure action, Little Chiquita settled upon her course of action without further loss of time.

Silently slipping outside the lodge again, she groped around until she found a round, heavy stone, something larger than her two fists when placed together. This she wrapped tightly in a strip cut from her dress, then reentered the lodge, holding the novel weapon hidden at her

side as she called to Little Bird, throwing back the flap as his head came through in response to her agitated appeal.

"He is sick—dying, I fear!" she panted, huskily. "Come help—if you love me, Little Bird!"

That was more than enough, and never suspecting aught, the Ute bent over Old Crazy—to fall like a lump of clay as that stone fell squarely upon his skull.

Old Crazy was aroused by the body falling across him so heavily, and Little Chiquita quickly made him comprehend what fate awaited them both if they could not escape. So, leaving Little Bird, alive, but bound and gagged, father and daughter stole away from the prison-lodge, hoping to reach a place of safety before their flight was known.

CHAPTER XI.

LUCK BEGINS TO CHANGE.

It "just happened" that the two particular chums were nearer the rear of the short line than the head of it, when Old Crazy led the way into the narrow defile at the mouth of which the Utes had set their death-trap, but neither of them were far enough off to escape that shower of bullets and arrows.

Without even a cry or a groan, Light-heart Lute tossed up his hands, falling backward, turning half-around as one shoulder came in contact with the arm of Poley Applejohn, then dropping like a log to the rocks over and through which they were just then picking their way.

The giant flinched as an arrow gashed his cheek, but that was purely instinctive on his part. He never felt the pain of that wound, nor of the bullet that broke skin between his left arm and his ribs, for he had no thoughts to spare for himself; he was all for his chum!

A deep, hoarse roar burst from his lips as he saw Light-heart Lute fall—as dead men drop, without cry or quiver!

He saw the red blood marking that loved face, even as he swiftly stooped to catch up the body of the man he loved more than all the world beside.

As he did this, the wild, savage, exultant yells of the Utes burst forth with doubled volume, and with the instinctive longing for vengeance which seems inborn, he jerked forth a revolver and sent a stream of bullets flying into the midst of the painted and feathered demons as they broke cover in their eagerness to complete the work so bloodily begun.

If fortunate in one respect, that action was luckless in another.

The fall of two of their number, just when they were beginning to believe the victory complete without even a wound for their side, sent the surviving red-skins back to cover with almost ludicrous haste, but it likewise concentrated their attention on the still uncrippled giant.

Even as he opened fire, Napoleon Applejohn was lifting Light-heart Lute from the rocks his life-blood was staining, and when his pistol was emptied, he thrust it hastily into its holster, then used both hands to swing that limp, lifeless body across his shoulders.

With no further thought than preserving the corpse of his loved comrade from further mutilation, the giant sped away in reckless flight, paying no attention to the surviving gold-hunters, sound or wounded, never once glancing back to see if the red-skins were coming in chase.

His actions were so swift, so unexpected, that the burdened man gained a considerable distance before the Utes realized the fact of his flight, and even then, though they opened fire upon him, he was aided no little by the gold-hunters who had escaped immediate death when the ambuscade was unmasked.

Those who, by some strange chance, had escaped unhurt from that first terrible volley, were also starting in headlong flight, either in hopes of escaping altogether, or of gaining some post where they might sell their lives more dearly than in the open. And, too, here and there one of the injured, wild-beast like, longing for revenge even in death, drew pistols or raised rifles to fire at least a dying shot.

All this helped distract the attention of the exultant savages, and no doubt to it the giant owed his immunity thus far.

And yet, he did not escape entirely. An arrow drove half its length through his right arm, bloody head and painted feather quivering as those tough muscles checked its further progress.

Here and there a bit of whirring lead stung his flesh, acting like so many keen spurs on a

willing horse: he was not crippled, and only lengthened his might strides.

But he swung that silent burden from his shoulders around in front of him, covering its vital points with his own body.

He had never dared hope that Light-heart Lute was alive; from the very first he had believed him dead, slain without knowing what had brought about his death, without catching a glimpse of the enemy, or an echo of that horrid clamor.

Yet—he would far rather bullet or arrow spent its force on his body than to have that loved corpse further marred.

Only once did he risk a glance backward; when the savage yells of the Utes burst forth with greater vigor, mingling with rapid firing: and then it produced far more important results than even he could realize or foresee.

The effort caused him to veer a little from a direct line of flight, and as he turned his head once more, he was just in time to avoid crashing into a ragged boulder lying in front, by jumping desperately to one side, almost falling in his effort to save Light-heart Lute from the collision.

Little knowing what important results that step would lead up to, Poley sprang abruptly to the left, while by taking the right he would be more nearly following the direction in which they had come.

He dashed on, drawing a full breath as he fancied the danger passed, even then failing to note that the supposed boulder was really the beginning of a rock wall, turning him into a side defile leading away from the narrow valley up which Old Crazy had led them that day.

Still thinking only of getting his loved chum's body out of the reach of those savage imps, Poley ran on, and on, a human machine of marvelous power and endurance. And still onward he would have pressed at top speed, until nature failed him completely, but for an unseen vine which caught his foot and cast him headlong.

He tried to save—not himself, but Light-heart Lute, clinging to the body with one arm, throwing out the other and trying to turn as he fell, to receive the first shock himself; but only with partial success.

Instead of striking the bare rock, they went plunging into a mass of elastic vines and tiny bushes. Into and through them! Further yet! Down what seemed to be an unending slope, covered with sharp—

Then the giant lost all consciousness.

That insensibility did not last so very long, though the tumble he had taken seemed enough to have killed any ordinary mortal. And, lifting his dizzy, whirling, swimming head, Poley Applejohn stared around him, his first thought now, as ever, for his loved chum.

Although almost his last memory was connected with the sun, shining full in his eyes as he fell, Poley found himself in obscurity like unto late dusk, and his first coherent thought was that he must have lain unconscious for hours.

Then he heard a low, indistinct groan as of some one in pain, and guided thus, his gaze fell upon the awkwardly doubled up figure of Light-heart Lute, lying in the gloom only a few feet away.

Dim though the light was that came through a narrow opening some little distance from where they were lying, Poley at once recognized his pard, and with a low gasping cry, he drew to its side, lifting the young man in his arms much as a mother handles her babe.

"Don't—twist my arm so—hallo, pard!"

Faint, husky, hardly articulate the words, but never did mortal ear catch sweeter music! And Poley Applejohn sobbed and moaned and vainly tried to cheer all in a breath: for those words came from the lips of Light-heart Lute!

Living, not dead!

And for many moments, that one glorious fact was all the giant pard could comprehend.

Little by little his intense emotion calmed, all the more quickly when he realized how badly Light-heart Lute had been injured, and how greatly he needed what assistance and comfort he could give him.

The huge, metal flask which had once before played an important part in bringing back strength and vitality, was brought into play, and thanks to the stimulant thus administered, Larrimer was soon able to have his hurts looked after, taking stock himself with a languid curiosity.

He had suffered more from that plunge into the cavern where the two pards now found themselves, than he had at the weapons of the Utes. Only one bullet had struck him, and that glanced from his skull without doing more

than tear the scalp and produce temporary insensibility. But in that fall, besides many painful traumas, his left arm had been broken between wrist and elbow.

"Not so bad but what it might have been worse, eh, Poley?" spoke Lute, with something of his old cheerfulness. "I'm still the Lad of Luck, even if it's rather dun-colored! And—what turned up, anyway?"

"Injuns. Run plum' in the middle o' a pile big 'nough fer to eat up two sech outfits," grunted Applejohn, turning his head to cast a suspicious glance in the direction of the hole through which they had so strangely entered that retreat.

"Not out there—reckon?"

"I run a ways, but—"

Light-heart Lute rose to his feet, but as quickly sunk back, his eyes blinded, his head swimming.

Applejohn made a grasp at his falling form, and in missing it, brought the blood-wet sleeve of his shirt in contact with Lute's face.

The young man uttered a low ejaculation, brushing his sound hand across his eyes, then saying:

"And you—you're hurt—bad, old boy!"

"No, I ain't—waal," for the first time feeling a twinge as he shook his arm, "jest a flea-bite, anyway."

But Light-heart Lute was already examining the massive arm, only satisfied when he knew that the wound was really nothing very serious. He insisted on having it cared for without further delay, but the giant pard shook off his loving touch.

"Time a-plenty fer that, a'ter I've tuck a look—'pears like some o' them dug-gun imps was chasin' of us, an'— Le' me go take a squint, anyway, boss!"

Without waiting for permission, Poley drew the loaded revolver which had not been lost during flight or tumble, thanks to the spring-top of his holster, creeping silently up the steep slope leading to the partially masked entrance to the cavern into which they had so fortunately tumbled.

His brain was clearing rapidly, and he paused to listen intently before venturing to lift his head high enough to catch a fair view of the outer world. He caught a faint, far-away yell, a couple of shots in quick succession, but that was all. Not a sound that could cause alarm came to his ears from any near point.

He peered forth, without making any discovery worthy of note. And with a long breath of relief as he decided that, if followed, he had luckily thrown the Indians off the track, he returned to his chum.

Though less than five minutes were consumed by this precaution, Light-heart Lute seemed marvelously restored, looking, moving, talking almost like his old-time self; and in his gratitude for this great boon, Poley Applejohn meekly submitted to being overhauled and stock taken of his injuries.

These were numerous enough and ugly enough to entitle any common man to a hospital ticket, but the giant made light of them in his own way, using his arms after a fashion that plainly proved he was by no means disabled.

The arrow had been broken by his fall, and he pulled out the feathered end. His other arm had been pierced by a bullet, but the bone had not suffered. Those two wounds were the worst, and though the giant declared that it was wasted pains, Light-heart Lute insisted in binding up the hurts, with Poley's assistance.

"Luck's changed a bit, pard, but still it might have been worse," Lute nodded, when this was accomplished. "If the red-skins don't drop in on us— What did you see outside, pard?"

"Not 'nough fer to skeer me out o' takin' 'nother squint," was the prompt response, as Applejohn turned toward the slope once more. "Ef I didn't lose the head o' me wuss than ever Old Crazy did, thar was a passel o' reds a-follerin' of me. An'—I'll look, anyway!"

He crept up the slope, pausing to listen as before. Hearing nothing to create alarm in his mind, he raised his head through the opening, slowly sweeping his gaze around, when two shots came, ringing spitefully.

CHAPTER XII.

BARRED IN AND BARRED OUT.

The shots came from directly in front of his face, though from the opposite side of the narrow valley or pass, and just as Applejohn caught sight of a figure—unmistakably clad in white-man style, though those twin puffs of blue smoke came too quickly for even his keen eyes to note more.

Instinctively he jerked his head down and back, but not quick enough to have cheated death had the bullets been aimed with greater accuracy. As it was, they flattened on the flinty rock close beside him, stinging his face keenly with bits of lead, completing the strange catastrophe begun by his foot slipping from the rock-point against which it had been braced.

To save himself, Applejohn flung out a hand, his strong fingers closing on a wedge-shaped piece of rock lying at the foot of another and greater mass.

His whole weight was cast upon that stone, and it came away in his fingers, letting him slide swiftly down the slope, just as Light-heart Lute sprung forward with a warning shout:

"Look out for the—"

A heavy crash drowned the rest of his cry, and at the same time all light seemed blotted out!

Lute hurled himself upon Poley, trying to drag or roll him to one side, fully expecting both would be crushed to pulp under the rocky mass which he had caught sight of as it started to fall. But—if such was to be their fate, it would all have ended ere this!

He was just able to realize this fact, then his whirling brain turned him sick, and he sunk in a limp and nerveless heap by the side of the bewildered giant.

Poley was first to recover, though he had fared but roughly in his tumble, and was still further put at a loss by the utter darkness which had fallen upon them, all in an instant.

"Ef it ain't all a hoodoo, then I want to—*Good Lawd!*"

He sat staring upward at the entrance, now reduced to a narrow crevice, hardly wide enough for one to slip a flattened hand through, as the short ribbon of light assured him.

"Waal, I be dug-gun!" he once more ejaculated.

"I saw the rock falling, and I thought— Keep to one side, Poley!" unsteadily spoke Light-heart Lute, hardly able to realize that there was no longer danger of that huge mass thundering down the slope to complete their ruin with death.

It took some little time to clear their wits sufficiently to comprehend all that had happened, and just how that all had come to pass; but in the end they managed to reason it out.

Applejohn, on his first trip of inspection, had noticed the existence of a narrow shelf or nearly level reach of rock, wide enough for him to kneel upon with comfort while listening for the enemy without. He recalled, too, how he had tried to save himself from falling when his face was stung by those bullets, by catching the rock-wedge. And in describing how he saw what seemed to be half of the rock wall start to fall when Poley came slipping down the slope, Light-heart explained that nearly total eclipse of the light.

"Waal, it's got a level bottom to rest on, an' I reckon it'll hold tight long 'nough fer me to try fer 'nother peep, anyway," decided the giant pard, rising and shaking himself, making sure that his pistol had received no material injury, but was in good working order.

The Lad of Luck caught his arm, but Poley won his way, for Lute, too, had caught the echo of those nearly fatal shots. Since enemies were so near, the sooner they learned all they could about their defenses, the better. And by insisting on bearing his chum company, Lute compromised the matter.

Together they cautiously crept up the slope, now rendered doubly difficult by the almost complete darkness.

They carefully avoided touching the fallen rock in any part, until after listening intently for any suspicious sounds from outside.

At first they heard nothing, and had Poley been less certain that he had caught sight of a human figure, and had not his still smarting cheek significantly reminded him how narrowly those shots had missed the target at which they had almost certainly been aimed, he might have believed that but part of the "hoodoo" which he felt had been cast over them as a spell.

"But I ketched as fair a squint as ever—thar!"

He jerked his head swiftly back from the narrow crevice through which he was about to attempt a look, for just at that instant a number of shots rung out distinctly, plainly discharged at no great distance, and closely followed by the wild, fierce war-cry of the Utes.

The two pards instinctively shrunk as far to one side as their situation would permit, their first and most natural idea being that the Indians had discovered their presence, though an instant's reflection told them how highly im-

probable that was. Even with the keenest eyes in all the Ute tribe pressed close to that narrow crack, all within would have been an utter blank in that gloom.

"Tain't us, don't ye see?" guardedly muttered the giant, after several more shots rung forth. "They hain't even one pill hit the rocks any ways nigh to us."

Even as the last words passed his lips, a glimpse of the truth was granted them, for a loud, hoarse shout came to their ears—a sound which no red-skin ever born could have given birth to.

"They're whites—our pards!" panted Light-heart Lute, greatly excited by the discovery. "Try to roll the rock back, man! I can't stay idle here while they—"

"Stiddy, lad!" interrupted Poley, slipping a broad palm over those lips, a strange glow leaping into his own eyes. "It was a white man as tried to pot me, back yen!"

"You don't—"

"I see'd him plainer, a heap sight, then I'm seein' you this minute, Lute," was the swift retort. "An' I kin 'most make oath it was Showy Joe Hoover, him own dirty self, too!"

He spoke too earnestly for his meaning to be mistaken, and for a brief space Light-heart Lute remained irresolute.

He recalled how viciously the flashy gambler had acted, both toward Old Crazy and himself, before that ill-starred journey was begun. He remembered, too, how on two different occasions some of their number had expressed a belief that their party was being spied upon, and their conviction that when the bonanza was finally reached, they would have to fight for their claims against heavy odds.

At the time he had paid little attention to these muttered forebodings, wholly absorbed as he was in trying to solve his hopes and fears concerning the identity of Old Crazy with his long-missing parent; but now it all came back to him.

Still—

"They're white, and so are we, Poley Applejohn!" he firmly said, his hand grasping the edge of the mighty rock. "Lay hold, pard! We'll help lick the Injuns first, then lick Showy Joe if we have to, later!"

Silently the giant complied, but their utmost efforts were in vain. Ten-fold their force could not return the mighty rock to its former resting-place, though so little had sufficed to destroy its cunning balance.

They could not secure a fair hold, nor had they sufficient foothold to brace them at their best. The rock did move, perceptibly, but toward the cavern, if anything.

When he saw this, Poley slipped down the incline, groping around until he found the rock-wedge which he had involuntarily carried with him on a former descent. Returning with this, he carefully inserted the thinner edge under the rock on the side toward the cavern, drawing a full, free breath when this was done.

"Ef we was outside, with room a'cordin' to our size, mabbe we mought be able fer to upset the hull business; but we're in, an' they ain't a dug-gun bit more room hyar then we kin keep healthy our own two lonesome selves—no, they ain't, now!"

Light-heart Lute made no reply, for none was needed. He read the thoughts that lay back of that action, and he felt that Poley was acting all for the best.

Even if those shots at the giant's head had been fired by mistake, under the impression that he was an Indian, and by one of their late companions, those savage yells—now no longer to be heard—only too plainly proved that they had bitter, relentless enemies near at hand.

True, there was nothing to show which party had conquered in that brief fight just past, though the chances seemed against their own color; but since they could not get out themselves, there could be no harm in barring out all others. Time enough to ask their help when they were satisfied of their being friends.

They waited where they were until the light gradually faded away, though their position was anything but comfortable on that narrow ledge, ending as it did only a few feet to the left of the narrow crack.

"I reckon the circus is over, Lute," at length said Poley, in low, grave tones. "It's kinder stiffenin' the ole man up, sech close quarters, but ef you say stay—all right!"

"No. We'll go down. If we could be of any service to those poor fellows, it'd be different. But— Yes, we'll go down, Poley."

It was not often Light-heart Lute was known to sigh, but he gave one then, born of his utter inability to aid and assist those of his own race

who might even then be suffering agonies of torture in the pitiless hands of the Indians.

"Ef they raally need help, I reckon they're long sence past needin' of it, pard," said the giant, as they began the descent.

Not particularly clear, but Light-heart had no difficulty in divining his real meaning.

They reached the bottom of the slope in safety, and picking out as comfortable a location as they might, through the sense of feeling alone, they curled up their legs and settled down, to talk in guarded whispers.

There was enough in their present situation to afford ample food for thought, if not discussion, but neither was quite ready to squarely face that awkward problem. Time enough when they had fairly rallied from all they had thus far undergone.

As before stated, Light-heart Lute had seen nothing of the massacre at the pass, falling at the first volley from the Utes. Poley had seen but little more, yet what he had seen was clearly impressed upon his mind, and when Light-heart Lute questioned him, he told all he knew without reserve.

While picking up his chum, and emptying his revolver into the ranks of the yelling Utes, he caught a glimpse of Old Crazy. But a glimpse, as he admitted, yet that one brief picture gave them both food for thought.

"Thar he was, ahind the red-skins, jest rearin' up on his hind legs, shakin' all two both o' his fists at us, his mouth wide open like he was pourin' out cusses fit to blast a cast-iron monkey! An' ef he wasn't doin' of jest *that*, then I can't guess fer sour apples!"

"Then you think he led us into the trap, knowingly, pard?" slowly asked Light-heart Lute, his usual gravity betraying how deeply that description affected him.

"I leave it to you, Lute. Don't it smell that way?"

"But—he kept warning us that all who followed him would share the bitter, black curse under which he lived!"

"An' couldn't he see that the off'ener he said that, the heap-sight botter we-all was to keep on a follerin'?"

Light-heart Lute made no reply. The case looked black enough against Old Crazy, yet he could not believe the veteran was altogether evil. For—more strongly than ever did he believe that in this crazed being, he would eventually find his long lost father!

For many minutes their silence was unbroken, both gazing half dreamily up at that narrow crevice through which now twinkled a bright star. Until—all of a sudden the light was blotted out!

Their hands sought each the other, and listening breathlessly they sat waiting. Something or some one surely was— Hal!

A low, guttural voice came down to them: the voice of a Ute brave!

CHAPTER XIII.

RED CATS AND WHITE MICE.

It was only an ejaculation, or, possibly, a signal to some not distant companion, but despite that, and in spite of the distance between the blocked entrance and their present position, both Light-heart Lute and Poley Applejohn firmly believed they recognized the voice of an Indian, instead of one of their own color.

The star shone again, for a moment or two, then was once more blotted out by the shifting of the body outside the fallen rock.

The chums tightened their grip as their sharpened sense of hearing detected the faint shuffling of other footsteps on the rocks beyond, after which they were not kept long in waiting before having their first impression fully confirmed.

They distinctly heard a short, guttural sentence, then, after a barely perceptible pause, a response in a tone a key higher pitched, as though question and answer had been exchanged by those without.

Neither Lute nor Applejohn were acquainted with the Ute patois, but while they could only guess at the meaning of those words, they could no longer doubt the color or race of the speakers.

"Injuns, by glory!" softly murmured Poley, his bearded lips brushing the ear of his young pard.

"Sure!" came the response in the same guarded tones. "Steady! Just slide along, out o' the way if the—front door is kicked in!"

"Done locked—can't come in!"

The giant smothered a satisfied chuckle as he remembered how carefully he had pressed that stone wedge home, and though fairly confident

that nothing short of powder could force that rocky mass inward, so long as his "key" held its position, he silently complied with the hint given by the Lad of Luck.

Although this change of position hindered them from marking the movements of the red-skins as closely, through the change from light to darkness, and *vice versa*, by means of the crack and the bright star so far away, by keeping their ears on the alert, the chums could make a fairly accurate guess as to what was going on outside.

"While sweating a mighty sight less," Light-heart Lute whispered to the giant, with a faint sigh of relief.

He could not forget the awful horror which had assailed him when fully expecting that rocky mass to thunder down the slope and crush both Poley and himself to a hideous pulp.

Even Applejohn felt a bit more secure, despite his firm faith in the efficacy of his stone key. For, after a few minutes spent in low talk, the Utes attempted to remove the rock which blocked the entrance to the cavern.

"That *does* settle it!" grimly muttered Lar-rimer, under cover of the noise made by that effort. "The imps knew of this hole before, and know that dornick didn't shift position without help!"

"Looks that way, sure!" softly rumbled the giant, in return. "Ef they didn't foller my trail this fur, or didn't was nigh 'nough to see jest the pint that dug-gun fool white critter was peggin' way at. Ef they did that—"

He left the sentence incomplete, and both gripped their weapons tightly, instinctively inhaling long breaths, like men who feel a tough fight is coming swiftly. For, just then a sound, beginning at the fallen-rock, and rattling down the slope, told of a loosened fragment. And their natural belief was that the stone key had been shaken from its hold, after which—

Neither cared to go beyond that point, even in thought. And in stern, grim silence they awaited the end.

Minute after minute passed by, without the rocky mass toppling over to leave the entrance free to the red-skins, and once more the penned-in fugitives began to hope for better things.

Poley Applejohn reached out and groped around in the utter darkness until his fingers closed upon the fragment of rock the falling of which had so startled them. He could hardly smother his cry of delighted relief as he felt that this was neither the whole nor a part of his stone key.

"I knew it couldn't be, an' I was a dug-gun fool fer ever thinkin' it could be!" was his blundering, but perfectly sincere whisper, as he made his discovery known to his chum.

Up to this time, the movements of the enemy without had been masked as much as possible, true to their crafty nature, and the caution they displayed was sure proof that they knew the fallen rock kept them from some of their hereditary enemies.

That it had fallen, and recently, they must have felt assured, either from some outward signs, or because they were familiar with the opening which that fall had closed. In no other manner could their actions be fully accounted for.

Having failed to remove that barrier by masked means, they now called undisguised force into play, hammering away at the edge with something in the shape of a ram: log or stone, the chums could only guess.

"You're mighty good-lookin', but ye can't come in!" softly chanted the giant, his memory going back to the happy nights when he had so often "shaken a foot" to the tune of that old song.

Presently the hammering ceased, and after a brief period of quiet, a red glare lit up the darkness, and with a thunderous report, a gun or pistol was discharged by having its muzzle first thrust into the crack so often alluded to.

The bullet wasted its force on the rock floor, or by glancing from that to the wall above or beyond. Such salutes could do no harm to the chums, since they were far to one side of the line of fire.

"Just make a smell, and that won't last long!" yawned the Lad of Luck, beginning to feel the need of repose, now that the mental strain was slackened. "Poley?"

"Right hyar, Lute."

"If those villains manage to kick in the front door, and the racket don't fetch me up all-standing, give me a hunch, will you?"

"You ain't shorely—"

"I shorely am, Poley!" with another irresistible yawn. "Warm your hoofs before you crawl into bed, or lay awake to make sure you don't

fool me into feeling like a married man by giving me an arctic shock. *Sabe, Poley?*"

If Poley replied, his words were drowned by a couple of shots fired through the crack by the baffled red-skins. But the Lad of Luck was too sleepy to repeat his words, and curling up in as comfortable a position as he could command, Light-heart Lute was not long awake.

No more shots were fired by the Utes, and as only the echoes answered by way of paying them for the waste of ammunition, they may have decided that their first belief was wrong; that none of the fugitives had found refuge below.

Be that as it may, no further efforts were made to remove the rock barrier, and after listening intently for possibly half an hour, Poley Applejohn cautiously crept up the slope to listen with bated breath at the narrow crevice.

Neither voice nor footfall met his ear, and when full ten minutes crept by with nothing more alarming than the faint moaning of the night wind among the rocky peaks and defiles without, the giant pard as quietly returned to his station beside the soundly slumbering lad.

Satisfied now that even if the Utes had not given over the quest for good and all, that they could not effect an entrance without making sufficient noise to rouse him from the soundest slumber, Poley Applejohn also curled himself up, and before long fell asleep.

The remainder of that night was spent without further alarm, and when Light-heart Lute roused up with a start and an ejaculation, almost the first thing his eyes fell upon was a bright slant of yellow light coming down the incline.

"Mornin', pard," cheerily came to his ears, though in guarded tones. "Begun to think I'd hev to change the name of it to dinner, from the rate you was playin' that bazoo—not to say snorin'!"

"Dinner?" yawned the Lad of Luck, rubbing his eyes with his sound hand and sitting up. "I'd begin to grow fat if I could only see the ghost of a mouthful of—why, you delicious old villain, you!"

"I was jest gwine to bide it whar it'd do the most good to my own ribs," meekly rumbled Poley, as his chum stared at the "spread" of cold meat and crushed "hunk" of "dough-boy" which the giant had provided for that awakening. "But sence you've ketched me at it, reckon I'll hev to go snucks—eh?"

"Tell you later; no time to talk until— Reckon any of those copper-colored cat's'll jump down on us Poley?"

"They's done skun out, I reckon," was the quiet response. "I can't see no signs 'ith eyes or ears, an' I've bin up yender three times sence gittin' up."

Satisfied on this point, Light-heart Lute fell to eating, too hungry to feel the lack of water, though it was but a dry breakfast, at best. The agreeable task was a short one, for the supply was small.

"Now for taking a stroll outside, Poley," he said, rising to his feet.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GHOST OF A FIDDLE.

"WHICH'LL ye try fu'st, Lute; the front door, or the back yard?"

"The back—what d'ye mean by that, old man?" ejaculated the Lad of Luck, mechanically turning his face in the direction opposite the entrance above.

Applejohn quickly explained, Lute listening with growing interest.

The giant had not been idle since awakening at the first dawn of day, and though the gloom with which that lower level was naturally enshrouded, hindered him from doing much more than feeling about, he had explored their present quarters sufficiently to ascertain that its dimensions were much greater than either of them had suspected, up to the present time.

"I ain't sayin' that it's anythin' more'n a big hole in the airth, ye want to mind, pardner," he added, prudently, to temper the sudden glow of hope which he caught flashing into those wide-open blue eyes. "Mebbe thar ain't no other way out 'ceptin' up yen—an I've see'd 'nough to be pritty sure that we can't make the raffle thar 'thout help from t'other side—but we kin take a look, fur's it goes."

"Or break our blessed neck trying!" grumbled Lute, peering at the bank of darkness lying beyond.

"Waal, 'tain't so mighty bad as that comes to, nuther," chuckled Poley, who seemed to delight in breaking his news by degrees. "Mebbe you've met up 'ith tonier lamps ur kendles then

this 'sortment, but when a critter cain't do better, he's a hog ef he cain't come down to wuss 'thout gruntin' too mighty often. "An—"

"Burr-r-r!" chattered Light-heart Lute, hunching up his shoulders and drawing in his head with a counterfeit shiver. "Dreadful windy, this morning, isn't it, old man?"

Applejohn grinned good-naturedly as he accepted the veiled hint, and without further explanation showed the Lad of Luck his discovery: a mass of dry sticks, leaves and pine cones, lying in a little excavation under the wall on the side of the incline opposite to their sleeping-place.

It was evidently the nest or bed of some wild animal, though the absence of disagreeable odor proved it to have been long deserted.

As Poley hinted, the material might have been better adapted to their needs, but with proper precautions it could be made to answer.

"For, even if the hole runs back any great distance, I'm not so sure we'd be acting wisely in straying far from this spot," thoughtfully observed Light-heart, glancing back at that ray of light. "Wouldn't it be wisest to put in our time trying to open that hole, and trust to luck for dodging the red-skins when once outside?"

"I don't b'lieve it kin be opened, but thar's alays time to come try, when they ain't nothin' else to do."

"Provided hunger don't get away with us!"

The giant chuckled grimly, tapping his capacious pockets.

"Ye've done ett our day's rations, an I kep' back 'nough to make two more sech 'visions. We kin afford to putt in one day 'splorin', ef the hole stretches back that fur, I reckon."

"Haven't got a keg of water stowed away with the grub, have you?"

"Wish I hed! Which is jest one more reason fer settlin' down to work in a solid hurry."

Stowing away the extra cones in their pockets, making a bundle of the sticks not required for the first set of torches, the wounded refugees were not long in preparing for their venture, each one eager to learn the truth of what lay before them.

Blocked by that mass of rock, they could still indulge in hopes of ultimate freedom as long as an incognita lay ahead.

Not knowing how long that exploration would last, only one torch was kindled, Lute holding his in reserve, held by the sling supporting his broken arm, thus permitting him to carry a drawn revolver in his serviceable hand.

Neither man had retained his Winchester, both having been dropped when the Utes unmasked their death-trap the day before; but they were liberally provided with cartridges, and could hold their own against any reasonable odds in case a fight for life lay awaiting them.

Poley quickly led the way past the point to which his gropings in the dark had reached, and then he was fully as eager as his chum, straining his eyes to see what lay beyond the narrow limits of the light cast in advance by his smoky torch.

The walls of the cavern had drawn closer together, as well as lowered in height, but instead of coming to an end, they ran along, forming an irregular tunnel or pass. Here they widened into a small chamber, then contracted until there was barely room for the chums to proceed abreast, causing their hearts to throb more rapidly with the dread that the end of their exploration had come so soon.

But as time passed on and their journey lengthened without such an ending, their fears grew less and their hopes raised in proportion.

"Luck forever!" cried Lute, cheerily. "Dollars to cents that it runs clear under the range!"

"Waal, that's no reason why you want to send notice we're comin', pardner," grimly reproved the giant, stopping short as his improvised torch suddenly dropped to pieces in his hand. "I hev knowed men who got rich by waitin' on tel they knowed they was somethin' to holler fer, afore splittin' tha'r thrapple."

"And I've known men who never hollered at all, simply because they waited until the chance had passed them by unimproved," laughed Lute, accepting the veiled reproof all in good part.

Though they had matches in abundance, it proved no easy task to set the second torch alight, and they were both engaged thus, when each gave a start, catching their breath sharply, leaning forward to peer into the darkness.

Faint, indistinct, now dying entirely away, then swelling to clearness, a strange sound came to their ears; doubly strange in such a location as this.

"Ef it ain't—the ghost of a fiddle!" gasped

Poley, in awe-stricken tones, lifted barely above his breath.

The same wild fancy had struck Light-heart Lute, incredible as it appeared. He could not believe his own senses for some minutes, but the longer they listened, the plainer the music sounded, almost as though the unseen musician was slowly approaching them.

Then, with a low smothered cry, the younger refugee moved forward through the intense gloom, no longer thinking of torch-lighting, intent only on solving that riddle—on once for all proving the truth or falsity of his strange belief.

"Stiddy, Lute!" warningly muttered Poley, springing forward and catching Larrimer by a sleeve. "Mebbe thar's a hole ahead in the dark, an'—ketch me, so!"

Having won the lead, the giant kept on, slipping his feet along the uneven floor to guard against plunging into a possible pitfall, satisfied to run all risks so long as he could bear the brunt.

The music grew clearer, louder in its wailings, until all doubt was ended: someone was playing the violin ahead of them, and at no very great distance. And—who could that musician be, but Old Crazy?

"I don't reckon it's a Injun," muttered Poley, drawing and cocking a revolver. "But the old 'coon was in the middle of a wheen o' the copper imps when I see'd him last, an' mabbe thar's some o' the kit a-stickin' to him till yit!"

If Light-heart Lute heard, he could not be said to heed, for with the notes of that fiddle—playing the old song which had produced such a curious effect on the old miner—came his recent hopes of discovering a long-lost parent, with redoubled force.

As the music itself gave fair warning, they had not much further to grope, presently catching sight of a faint glow, which grew brighter with each step, until the red light of an open fire became visible.

Still nearer the two chums crept, Light-heart Lute only seeing those two figures in the fire-glow, Poley gazing warily about in quest of more dangerous looking strangers.

The musician was indeed Old Crazy, sitting on a pile of skins near the fire, his cheek lovingly resting on an end of a rude-looking, self-made violin, across the strings of which he was drawing an equally clumsy bow; yet from that uncouth combination he drew sounds full of sweet, melancholy music of which a professor might have felt proud.

Little Chiquita was standing near, to one side, her clear profile visible to the chums as her head bowed in listening.

For a few moments this tableau lasted, to be broken by the girl, whose head suddenly lifted, whose dark eyes flashed swiftly about. But then, with a slight yawn and languid lifting of the arms, like one fatigued or sleepy, Chiquita moved across to where a bow and quiver hung to a point of rock.

Taking these, stringing the one and slinging the other across her shoulder, she came back to the fire, moving so easily, so unsuspiciously, that even Poley Applejohn never once divined the truth, until the bold girl had accomplished her purpose. Shielding Old Crazy with her own fair body, Chiquita sent arrow after arrow into the gloom where they stood!

"Hold! we are friends, Old Crazy!" cried Lute, springing forward.

CHAPTER XV.

WHO IS OLD CRAZY?

YET once again Poley Applejohn proved his devotion to his chum, leaping forward and swinging Light-heart Lute to one side, interposing his own huge bulk just in time to catch the next arrow in his shoulder.

But that was Little Chiquita's last shot, with the chums for a target, for a second mighty bound carried the giant near enough to catch the fair amazon in his arms, holding her helpless while crying aloud to his friend:

"Wake up the ole critter, Lute! Make him show this pesky wildcat the differ' atwixt fri'nds an' inemies, or—"

Most fortunately the surprise did not throw Old Crazy completely off his balance, and though it cost a good many words to make him fairly realize that it was not a ghost from a bloody grave that confronted his startled gaze, in the end a perfect understanding was arrived at.

For some time after Little Chiquita was made to understand that she had been fighting friends instead of enemies, there was considerable embarrassment felt on both sides, which was not lessened by the necessity of extracting the arrow

from Poley's shoulder, and dressing the hurt thus inflicted.

He declared that it was nothing but a flea-bite, yet he shrunk and quivered as those little brown fingers touched his bared shoulder, for Little Chiquita insisted on bandaging the wound her hands had inflicted. And as she saw this nervous shrinking, pity came into her great black eyes, and there were almost tears in her musical voice as she begged his forgiveness for harming him so shamefully.

"You didn't—you couldn't—I'd jest like to hev ye—" the wounded giant began stammering, when Light-heart Lute maliciously imitated the angry spitting snarl of the wildcat to which, in his excitement, Poley had unluckily likened this charming creature.

Little Chiquita whirled swiftly, reaching out for bow and arrow, completely deceived by that imitation, but Poley interpreted it aright, and for the first time since their alliance began, he felt like thrashing the Lad of Luck.

His confusion, the low laugh of Lute, the grim chuckle given by Old Crazy, all combined to bring back her memory, and then it was Little Chiquita's turn to show embarrassment.

Still, the wound was attended to, at length, and all explanations were gotten over with.

Little Chiquita had not actually caught sight of the chums before she interposed her body as a shield to that of her father, and began sending her feathered shafts into the gloom beyond, but she caught sounds that warned her some person or some thing was stealing upon them, and her first thought was of Little Bird, the Ute brave.

When she humbly asked forgiveness for her mistake, both chums granted it freely, Light-heart Lute in words, Poley with his big blue eyes.

Then Old Crazy told his story, and the chums explained how they escaped the ambushade and wandered to that particular spot.

This interchange put them all on good terms, for Little Chiquita had already learned how the chums risked their own lives to save her father from the diggers, before that ill-starred bargain was struck. She said little, but endeavored by her actions and her care for their comfort, to make them understand how grateful she felt.

Old Crazy looked and acted much more like a completely sane being than he had at any time since their first meeting; and abandoning his beloved fiddle for the time being, he explained their present location, its advantages and its drawbacks.

It was only one of the many snug retreats which he had formed or discovered during his wild life, and the one which he felt was least liable to discovery by the Utes, should they persist in searching for their escaped captives. It was well supplied with food, in the shape of dried meat and smoked fish. It contained a living spring of water, and had many cunning nooks where one might hide or, if brought to bay, make a strong fight for life against odds.

On the other hand, it was perilously near the Ute encampment, and if the quest was sufficiently prolonged, discovery of the cavern must almost certainly be made in the end.

The remainder of that day was spent in converse, in eating and drinking, with an occasional tune from Old Crazy's fiddle, which implement he exhibited with genuine pride.

And Light-heart Lute spent considerable time in talking to Little Chiquita, doing his best to win her perfect confidence.

Poley, on the contrary, just as Lute advanced, seemed to retreat, until he kept apart from all, grave and even gloomy. He explained this alteration by hinting at his fear of being surprised by the Utes, but his eyes gave his tongue the lie.

He was not actually jealous of his chum: that could never be, for, as a matter of course, everything good and choice was Larrimer's by right. But—if he had not been so infernally idiotic as to call her—her!—a wildcat!

It was not until the night had passed, and the second day was well advanced, that Light-heart Lute felt he had gained Little Chiquita's confidence sufficiently to risk questioning her on the point ever uppermost in his mind.

Old Crazy was lost in his beloved music, playing softly, slowly, as much from choice as through dread of reaching unfriendly ears with his sweet strains.

Poley was invisible, doubtless "on guard," as he would have said, but in reality gazing upon those two graceful figures sitting so close together, talking in soft whispers.

Yet neither spoke a word which he might not

have heard, and in welcome, lover-like thought, his fancy interpreted their attitude and demeanor toward each other.

Little Chiquita was giving the history of Old Crazy, so far as she knew it, deftly drawn on to perfect frankness by the adroit questions asked by the Lad of Luck.

Yes, the being he knew only as Old Crazy was her own father. He had fallen into the hands of the Utes, many years ago, nearly famished, in rags, bearing many still sore hurts on his person. She could say this much, for she had often heard her mother repeat the words.

That mother was then living with the same band of Indians. She was one of them, so far as birth and training went, though her heart seemed even more white than her skin. She was the only child of a white captive, taken from a train of emigrants by the chief who afterward made her his squaw. And, in turn, Little Chiquita was the only child of Old Crazy and the sad-eyed, half-breed woman.

This, in substance, was the account which Light-heart Lute extracted from the maiden. He could not doubt her perfect honesty, though he knew that, should Old Crazy really prove to be his father, lost track of so many years ago, this girl, his half-sister, must have been quite a child when Stephen Larrimer's lawful wife died.

Varying his questions, and trying all he knew to draw forth some word or point on which he could fix as a beginning to unravel the perplexing enigma, Light-heart Lute spent fully two hours in that close companionship, the end of that interval leaving poor Poley Applejohn in a truly lamentable condition of mind.

For the first time in his thirty years of life, the giant pard had tumbled over head and ears in love. Already, though he had hardly interchanged two-score words with Little Chiquita, he felt that life without her for a mate, would be hardly worth enduring.

With any other person for a rival, the big fellow would have made a good fight for himself and the glorious prize; but not against the Lad of Luck. If his choice had fallen there, let him win, undisputed.

Such loyal friendship is seldom met with among men, and when it is heard of, the listeners are not apt to scoff or jeer, calling the one an idiot and the other a knave, if not branding the recorder as a liar of monumental dimensions.

Neither laugh, jeer nor taunt can change the record, however.

When Larrimer broke off his questions, he was almost as much in the dark as at first. He had not solved the question of who was Old Crazy, and he began to fear he would never grow any wiser on that perplexing point.

After a period of silence, Little Chiquita arose and passed over to where her father was still caressing his fiddle, while Light-heart Lute also rose, to seek out his chum. And Poley's first low growl told that he had caught at least a portion of that talk; the finish, explaining how they had fled from the Utes because of the lovely persecutions of Little Bird.

"Dug-gun the copper-hide! Jes' let me git a grip onto him, an' ef I leave him a weenty feather to— Look!"

From out of the gloom beyond the fire-lit circle, a nearly nude, painted and be-feathered shape leaped, knocking Old Crazy over with a vicious sweep of a tomahawk, then claspings Little Chiquita in his sinewy arms as a wild, exultant yell parted his lips.

It was Little Bird, the Ute warrior!

CHAPTER XVI.

LIFE OUT OF DEATH.

THAT was the last war-cry Little Bird ever uttered, this side of the happy hunting-grounds, at least.

With a roar that filled the entire cavern, Poley Applejohn bounded forward, never seeing, never hearing the Indians who rushed from the darkness to back up their leader.

His only thought was of rescuing Little Chiquita and punishing that paint-bedaubed demon.

The Ute turned half-way at that roar, and struck viciously with his tomahawk, dropping his prize to defend himself. Poley dashed both weapon and arm aside, then gripped the savage by the throat, whirling him clear of his feet, then hurling his body around and letting it fly full against the on-coming Utes, throwing them into confusion and upsetting at least two-thirds of their number.

At the same time the Lad of Luck came with a rush, sending bullets ahead of him, only drop-

ping pistol for knife when he dared fire no longer lest he hit the giant instead of an Indian. It was a wild scramble for a few seconds; it could not last longer, for lack of material, for with such a raging hercules in full swing, work is terribly swift and horribly thorough.

It was all over by the time Little Chiquita recovered her footing and snatched up her bow.

Almost tearing Poley away from the no longer resisting enemy, Lute had him bear the senseless musician out of the light, where they would at least be safe from anything like deliberately aimed lead or arrows.

It did not seem possible that their victory could be so complete. Surely some of the Utes had escaped that crazy charge? Or, if not, others must be coming up?

While thus wondering, Light-heart was recharging his revolver, feeling morally certain that every shot would be required before the end. Yet, that was accomplished, and still no further attack!

"Clean sweep, or I'm a liar!" muttered Poley, drawing a long sigh as he turned away from where Little Chiquita was sobbing over her father, lying so still and unresponsive to her tender caresses, her prayers, her pleading for just a word, a sign that death had not claimed her only loved one. "You help her, Lute. I'm goin' to see what's the lookout."

"I'll go with you, for— No, you're right, old man," brokenly said his chum. "You can hold the entrance alone, if they haven't got inside already. If they have—well, we'll die together, at any rate!"

Afraid to risk a light lest it direct the enemy too plainly, the Lad of Luck knelt beside the motionless body, trying to learn the full extent of his injuries by passing his sound fingers over the bleeding skull.

But before he could discover more than that Little Bird had used the side of his tomahawk, instead of striking with the blade, Light-heart caught the sound of rapid firing in the direction of the cave entrance, and knowing that Poley was in trouble he barely lingered long enough to warn Little Chiquita against exposing herself to the light, then dashed away to back up his chum.

He drew a long breath of glad relief when he caught a glimpse of daylight without meeting the enemy, for now he knew that the giant pard had been just in time to check the in-coming of the savages.

"Make room for your uncle, Poley," he cried, cheerily, sending a bullet into the broad chest of a painted warrior, who was coming with a rush that betrayed a recklessness usually foreign to red-skin nature. "Follow suit, old man, and we'll take every trick!"

Sheltered themselves, with a background of gloom, while the Utes were forced to cross an open, level stretch of ground before they could plunge into that dark opening, now fully unmasked by Little Bird as he led his half-dozen braves in advance of the main force, the odds were not so terribly unequal, after all. And while their pistols belted out, the chums felt fully able to "hold the fort."

After that— A question they were not called on to answer, most providentially!

With a hoarse, united cheer, there came a volley of rifle-balls from a strong force of white men, and with yells of dismay, all of the Utes who were able to do so, turned to seek safety in headlong flight.

And five minutes later, the chums were laughing and shaking hands with—the very citizens from whom they had stolen away under cover of darkness, more than a week before!

Old Crazy was sitting up, supported by the arms of Little Chiquita, when the chums returned to the cavern, with several of the leading rescuers. And though there was a strange, dazed, bewildered look in the eyes of the old man, Light-heart Lute knew that he would not only recover from his wound, but that he would, almost certainly, live again in his brain, as in his body!

Eager as he was to forever set his haunting hopes and fears at rest, Luther Larrimer did not put them to the test just then. He had already waited so long that he could well afford to wait yet a little longer. Not until recovery was certain would he risk shocking that enfeebled brain, endanger that slowly reviving memory.

Having cared for the injured man as thoroughly as possible, leaving him to the tender care of his daughter, Light-heart Lute caused the bodies of the Utes who had followed Little Bird, to be carried out of the cavern. When

once under the clear light of day, it was seen how terribly the giant had avenged that insult offered the maiden whom he loved.

He had used only his bare hands, and that grip had lasted but a few seconds; yet the head hung as though it had never known a supporting column.

After the dead Indians were disposed of, explanations were in order on both sides, and quickly made.

That given by the chums does not require repetition, and that of the rescuing party can be almost as briefly disposed of.

They had managed to follow the trail of the party led by Old Crazy, and pressing on at top speed until fairly sighting them, had from that time rested content with sending a trusty man or two in advance, to follow the leading party, using all precaution to avoid being discovered, lest the old man take fright and refuse to act as guide any longer, or else lead them from, rather than to, his coveted bonanza.

They had not been near enough to take a hand in the fight following the ambushade, though they had been the means of saving several of the fugitives, among them Bat Johnson. And they declared, positively, that if those two shots which so narrowly missed killing Poley Applejohn, had been discharged by a white man, he could not have formed one of their number.

Showy Joe Hoover was not with them—had not been with them since their striking the right trail.

It was only a lucky chance that led them to be so near the spot when the Utes made their savage onset. They were in hiding, waiting for the scouts whom they had sent out to learn how strong a force the Indians could muster, before making any further efforts to find the coveted bonanza.

Light-heart Lute made known the agreement entered into with Old Crazy on condition that he point out his bonanza, and asked the men now present to ratify it. They instantly agreed to do so, and from that moment everything was harmonious.

It was nearly two days later before Light-heart Lute questioned Old Crazy as to his past, and then he learned the truth—far different from what his fond hopes had painted it!

His real name was William Blackwood, and he could only say that his long insanity must have been caused by an injury to his brain, received when he fell into a deep gulch. Of his after-life, only a dim, indistinct memory remained, though this appeared to be growing clearer as he gradually recovered his strength and overcame that terrible shock given him by Little Bird's hatchet-stroke.

Light-heart Lute was reluctant to abandon the wild hope which had led him so far, but, as the days went on, and Blackwood was better able to recall his past, he was forced to do so. Now, as for so many years, the mystery enveloping the fate of Stephen Larrimer was unsolved.

"But I'll learn the truth before I die!" declared the young man, earnestly.

William Blackwood—no longer "Old Crazy"—pointed out his gold-bearing tract, and all hands held aloof until after two claims of regulation size had been selected and properly staked off. Then lots were drawn, and claims chosen, in fair succession, until all were given a show for a fortune, provided the gold-bearing tract proved extensive enough.

Neither Lute nor Poley took a claim—the first wanted to be at liberty to renew his wanderings in quest of his father, and the giant chum—he had no heart for digging!

Until Light-heart Lute almost forced the secret from him, when the big fellow almost crushed in the Lad of Luck's ribs in his great joy.

"Win her if you can, old man, and if you fail, I'll bring my luck to bear on your behalf," the Lad said, laughingly, but thoroughly in earnest, for all that.

And when the big fellow plucked up sufficient courage to put his fate to the test, he found little difficulty in winning the prize; for it might have been his at any hour after Little Chiquita saw him handle Little Bird so easily!

Within the year, quite a mining town was located there, and as a stray "Gospel sharp" wandered that same way, Little Chiquita was converted into Mrs. Napoleon Applejohn, with all the style and ceremony a bustling mining town can display when "she jest lays herself wide open, ye know!"

Showy Joe Hoover drooped in, one fine day, and Poley lost no time in pinning him up in a corner, only permitting him to go unhurt after many a solemn oath that he had not fired those

shots which worked such an unexpected result.

If he was really innocent, which both Poley and Lute seriously doubted, the real culprit was never discovered.

THE END.

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Ready December 16.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,

98 William Street New York.